



明血約の ヴァイアサ

文月
Joe Takeduki

illust: 仁村有志

III



盟血約のレヴィアサン

The Leviathan of the Covenant

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丈月城



「あれがグリンダ……
ミス・グレゴリーの『蛇』か！」

欧州最強だった
蒼きルサルカとならぶ、
環太平洋エリアの撃墜王。

「グリンダ、
あなたの魔法を

みんなに
見せてあげなさい」



「し、失礼します……」

ハルはおそるおそる振り向いて、呆然とした。
羽純がまた浴場へ入ってきたのだ。



我、射陽の神弓を以て
天を衝き、

日輪を殺めん――

神弓より、焰をまとう

光の矢が放たれた。

屠竜の弓と屠竜の矢が

八〇〇余年の時を経て、

再衝突した。



Chapter 1 - The World Where There Are Dragons

Part 1

It was taking place in a dream.

However, Haruga Haruomi aka Hal already knew.

Rather than a simple dream, this was a battle to the death that had actually happened. It was in the past, centuries or millennia ago, decisive battles that had taken place repeatedly with the stratosphere as the stage.

Down below, the blue ocean and the earthen-colored land stretched afar.

The altitude was approximately forty thousand meters.

A mere glimpse into the distance and one would easily see the horizon's curvature. The fact of the Earth's round shape could be confirmed as soon as one reached such a height.

At this superlative elevation that human fighter jets had yet to make their battlefield, two super lifeforms were currently facing off.

"How exciting. Long have I waited for this moment, Queen!"

"Hooh... As someone only worthy of running errands for me, you are displaying too much vitality."

The challenger was colored as white as snow, her voice filled with acuity.

The challenged bore the color of crimson, magnanimously smiling with faint wryness.

This was a showdown between dragons, adorned by the contrasting colors of white and red respectively. Both dragons had massive bodies on the order of twenty meters in length.

However, the white dragon was more slender, giving an overall impression that was more agile.

The outspread pair of large wings on her back was displaying the grandeur befitting one who dominated the skies. The skin over her chest and arms had ossified, looking like armor forged from blue crystals.

In contrast, the red dragon's physique looked stronger.

Not only a size bigger than the white dragon, she was also more built more muscularly. Similarly, the chest was ossified into golden armor. Furthermore, the nine horns on her head were also gold in color.

Like their contrasting appearances, the two dragons' stances were also polar opposites.

"I hereby decree to my emblem, the Arrow of Sirius, I, Yukikaze, will now transform into the dragonslaying arrow!"

"My emblem, the Bow Star of the Southern Sky, manifest the dragonslaying bow in my hand immediately!"

The white dragon held the Rune of the Arrow whereas the red dragon possessed the Rune of the Bow.

Both parties chanted their respective mantras to issue orders to the runes of dragonbane residing in their right palms. In the next instant, the Arrow user's entire body glowed with blue-white radiance as she started flying upwards. At the same time, the Bow user summoned a golden longbow in her red left hand.

Hence, a supernatural battle began.

Just as the white dragon flying above had attained sufficient altitude and distance—

She flew straight at her enemy in a straight line. Accelerating fiercely and relentlessly, she easily broke the sound barrier, hurtling towards the target with speed faster than the eye could follow.

Flying like an arrow, the white dragon's body, glowing blue-white, had turned into the Arrow!

Confronted with this supersonic assault, the red dragon counterattacked with the Bow.

Placing the golden arrow that had manifested in her right hand onto the golden bow held in her left, she fired it. Simultaneously, a meteor rain—or rather, thousands of lights resembling meteors—descended from the sky. This rain of light was a barrage intended to pierce the white dragon.

Having turned into an arrow, the white dragon effortlessly evaded the golden barrage.

But in order to dodge the downpour of a thousand lights while flying at supersonic speed, she had to make split-second decisions in the air to perform all kinds of maneuvers, zigzagging left and right, swerving at high speed and moving up and down.

Her speed had reached the realm of lightning.

Continuing to evade with lightning speed, the white dragon soared through the sky, trying to penetrate her target.

Meanwhile, the targeted red dragon fired a second arrow.

As soon as it left the bowstring, this arrow turned into flames in the form of a nine-headed dragon, flying to incinerate the white lightning.

The flame dragon extended its necks fiercely, closing on the enemy from nine directions.

The white lightning flew circuitously so as to evade this attack.

—This was the showdown between the white dragon, who turned herself into a projectile weapon, versus the red dragon, the archer wielding the divine bow. Even among the runes of dragonbane, the bow and the arrow formed a special pair of runes.

Perhaps due to this reason, the successors of these two runes would tend to be more conscious of each other than necessary.

Hence, this battle was special for both of them.

Hal had no way of knowing this, but the mastermind causing him to experience this dream—the "magic wand" leading Haruga Haruomi the mortal along the path of unorthodoxy—had informed him.

However, this battle, supposed to be an extremely special occasion, ended up concluding in an exceedingly anticlimactic manner.

Because just as the two combatants were locked in an intense aerial battle with the stratosphere as the backdrop, the red dragon suddenly stopped moving.

The golden bow and arrow vanished from her crimson hands. Even the "imperishable protection" guarding her body disappeared as well.

Then the white dragon charged in a straight line like lightning. Enveloped in blue-white light, that massive white body was like an artillery shell.

Then came a violent impact. The crimson dragon was knocked away forcefully.

Perhaps due to the massive damage inflicted, the golden exoskeleton protecting her chest shattered, exposing what lay beneath. A huge hole had opened up on the red dragon's chest.

In truth, she was already heavily injured even before the battle began.

The red dragon managed to stop herself from crashing to the ground. Remaining hovering in the air, she stared at the white assailant with determined eyes. However, the magical power residing within her massive body had diminished greatly. Simply to remain hovering was already taxing her limit.

"So my path of conquest has reached an end here..."

The red dragon murmured, her tone of voice conveying self-deprecation and wryness.

She already knew this outcome before the battle. Due to the excessive damage accumulated in her heartmetal over her long life as a dragon king, she had already reached what was equivalent to the endpoint of longevity.

On the other hand, Hal was quite impressed that she could fight to such an extent using this body that was on the verge of death—

"My apologies, little lady. I cannot play with you any longer. Do not blame me for heartlessly passing away first. After all, it would be an insufferable insult to me as the great queen."

Confronted with assured death, the Crimson Queen was joking nonchalantly.

This fortitude made the white dragon pause. Originally intending to follow up the attack, the Arrow user murmured "hmm" and silently gazed at the enemy's majestic figure.

"Whether handing this head of mine to you or leaving my remains to lowly scum, I am loath to accept either outcome. If you desire it no matter what, find it using your own strength. This is my parting gift as the Crimson Queen!"

Smiling, the red dragon plunged her right hand into the hole in her chest.

What she drew out was a glowing red jewel. Roughly the size of a dragon's fist, it had a massive crack in it. This was the heartmetal belonging to an elite dragon—no, a great dragon king.

"Farewell, Princess Yukikaze, youngest of the dragon kings, wielder of the dragonslaying arrow!"

The red queen threw the red jewel downwards. Like a meteor, the red jewel fell straight down.

Ahead of it was a blue ocean and earthen-colored land. Having abandoned her most important organ, the dragon king's gigantic body began to gradually collapse and scatter like sand...

The instant the battle between fellow successors of the bow and the arrow concluded in an unexpected manner—

Hal suddenly woke up.

He was on the driver's seat of a light vehicle. Due to staying up the previous night, he could not hold back his drowsiness, so he said "I'll sleep for twenty minutes," and parked the car on the roadside to take a brief nap.

From the front passenger seat, the underclassman serving as Haruga Haruomi's "assistant" smiled.

"Have you slept your fill, Senpai? It has not even been ten minutes, you know?"

"Hmm... Yeah, I'm okay now. I already feel much more awake."

Hal suppressed a yawn and answered.

In fact, thanks to this brief nap, he had completely recovered the ability to think. More importantly, there was Shirasaka Hazumi's angelic smile.

Ahhh, she is so cute today too. Such inexplicably rude thoughts were making his mind operate at a higher speed.

Hal nodded firmly then gripped the steering wheel again. After lessons at school ended today, he had gotten changed at SAURU's New Town branch, Mirokudou, then set off on an "expedition" to the Old Tokyo Concession.

Currently, the two of them had passed the checkpoint at Ryougoku Bridge to reach the neighborhood of Kodenma inside the concession territory.

Half a month had elapsed since the battle against Pavel Galad.

It was now the latter part of May. Humidity was increasing in the air, heralding the arrival of the plum rain season. For Hal who had lived abroad over such an extended period of time, Japan's plum rain season was something he had not experienced in a long time.

"So all I need to do is fill these bags with the sand here?"

"Yeah. Don't bother sorting it out, just fill the bags up. By doing something akin to gold panning, we'll find what we need after we get back."

The place where he had brought Hazumi was the entrance to what was formerly Tokyo Station.

This was both the location where he had obtained the rune of dragonbane as well as the venue of Akuro-Ou's birth ritual. Activating magical sight, Hal

took out the Clockwork Mage. Then invoking a spell to search for magical power, he gazed intently, capturing even the slightest of magical power.

Finally, he targeted a large pile of white sand in a corner and began to gather the sand.

While opening the vinyl bag he had handed to her, Hazumi asked, "Umm, how are we going to carry out the gold panning you speak of...?"

"By sifting with a fine filter. The ancient Greeks even had a method using sheep. Ever since ancient times, the sheep has been a creature that symbolized wealth and gold."

"U-Using sheep to find gold!?"

"First they use fleece to line the riverbeds of rivers where gold sand can be found. Then they gather the gold sand that adheres to the wool, thereby amassing a fortune of gold. And sheep are easy to raise. That's why the more livestock you have, the wealthier you'll naturally be."

Whenever he imparted trivia to her, Hazumi would keep nodding, feeling very touched.

She looked so cute that it would inevitably bring a smile to one's face. Hence, Hal would spontaneously bring up knowledge he had acquired as a "treasure hunter" whenever an opportunity presented itself.

Then for a long while, the two of them gathered "sand" using the same method.

After securing a sufficient amount, Hal and Hazumi left the former Tokyo Station and returned to the light vehicle.

"Are we going back directly to carry out the filtering you mentioned just now?"

Hazumi looked like she really wanted to say "Please allow me to accompany you." However, Hal offered a different suggestion to the underclassman who was sitting in the front passenger seat.

"If you don't mind, do you want to practice 'that' first?"

"M-May I...?"

"Of course. And it won't cause anyone trouble either."

"Then please allow me to practice!"

Hazumi's eyes glimmered with joy.

Recently, Hal had been taking her frequently to Old Tokyo—

There was one time when sitting next to her upperclassman, a high school student who gripped the steering wheel and did whatever he wanted, Hazumi had murmured "I'd like to get a driving license when I grow up. It must be very fun, being able to go anywhere you want."

Immediately, Hal had invited Hazumi to take the driver's seat, then started to "instruct" her.

It was like how rural families would let their children drive on private farmland. Precisely because this was a dragon concession territory where there were no pedestrians or vehicles driving on the road, they were able to practice like this. Although Hal had indulged her in such an impulsive act simply because he wanted to see Hazumi's happy face, driving was something that needed as much practice as possible.

Besides—

In the case of an emergency, this skill might save Hazumi's life perhaps.

While this inauspicious thought secretly went through Hal's mind, the "training" ended and they returned to Tokyo New Town. Hal drove her home directly because Hazumi wanted to be back for dinner, then they parted ways.

Then the next day arrived. Hal went to school as usual because it was a weekday.

While eating his lunch of rice cakes and udon noodles at the cafeteria, Hal suddenly noticed.

"Now that I think more deeply about it, I've spent my time after school with Shirasaka for ten-odd days already."

" " " "

As soon as he muttered that, two gazes shot at him from girls who looked like they had something to say.

Sharing the same table as him, these two girls were Anastasya Rubashvili, aka Asya, and Juujouji Orihime.

"Y-You've been quite close to Hazumi-san. That's so unlike you, Haruomi."

Asya spoke in a slightly vicious tone of voice.

"I thought it was basically your policy to avoid troublesome human relationships as much as possible, wasn't it, Haruomi?"

"You're right, but Shirasaka is just so cute."

"C-Cute—how can the likes of Haruomi sound so much like a normal person with a fulfilling social life..."

"Moreover, she's obedient and doesn't cause any trouble. That's why I've decided to indulge her as much as possible."

"And a 180-degree change in personality to boot!?"

Next to the shocked Asya, Orihime sighed.

"Then Haruga-kun, I have something to say as Hazumi's 'elder sister.'"

After finishing the special of the day, a grilled fish set lunch, she put down her chopsticks and spoke.

"Isn't it time for you to show some restraint in teaching Hazumi weird things...? Guess what? Every night, she writes down your teachings as notes, Haruga-kun, to study over and over again."

"That's Shirasaka for you. She really is a wonderful and hardworking child."



"I asked her to give me a brief look. I can't believe I saw stuff including the likes of cosmetic surgery and Botox injections..."

"Oh that. We were watching television together a couple days ago when Shirasaka was curious about why a certain female artiste's facial expression was unnaturally stiff, so I gave her a brief explanation of the technique's pros and cons."

"S-Stop deliberately pouring that kind of evil knowledge into Hazumi's pure soul!"

"No no no, it'd be more worrying if she were completely ignorant of things like that."

"You might have a point but she almost finished an entire notebook in merely half a month. Isn't it time you held back a little!?"

Hearing Orihime's honest warning, Hal scratched his head and went "Oh I see."

Perhaps he might be teaching Hazumi too many random things on whim. Since he never had an assistant or apprentice before, Hal had no idea how to keep things in moderation either.

"Got it. I'll try my best to be careful."

"H-Hmm. I am really grateful to hear that from you."

Despite thanking him, Orihime continued to show a gloomy expression.

"Is there anything else worrying you, Juujouji?"

"N-No, it's nothing, just that—Oh right, because Asya-san's lunchbox is such a rare sight, I am quite curious where it was bought!"

For some reason, Orihime changed the subject in a joking manner.

Despite finding it strange, Hal still turned his gaze to his childhood friend's lunchbox. Creative Japanese cuisine. Inside the plastic container were all sorts of fried food that seemed to be vegetable tempura, Japanese-style rolled omelet, California rolls, yellow-colored rice that looked like it had been cooked with turmeric, etc.

"Nothing less expected of you, Orihime-san. How observant."

Asya finally calmed down, possibly because the discussion had turned to the topic of food.

"I bought this at the Little Buddha, my top recommendation among all the shops near the school."

"Huh? Isn't that an Indian curry shop?"

"It is, but the head chef is actually a Nepalese who learned his craft at a Japanese restaurant in India. More so than curry, his specialty is 'imitation Japanese food.' It's only because curry sells better that he started his business with a curry shop as the main draw. This is something I found out after frequenting the shop for about a week continuously."

"So you ordered a custom-made lunchbox..."

Since this was very much something that Asya would do, given her obsession with food, Hal could not help but nod in acknowledgement.

On the other hand, Orihime made a look as though she had difficulty accepting the idea.

"Advertising Indian curry when the head chef is clearly Nepalese, is that really okay...?"

"But not all Indian curry shops in Japan are opened by Indians either."

"From what I can see, there are many chefs who originated from Nepal or Pakistan."

"This actually involves all kinds of issues related to brokering Japanese work visas for these people, so it's unexpectedly complicated."

"Both of you are at fault for always bringing up this kind of trivia and being a bad influence for Hazumi..."

After Hal and Asya commented one after another, Orihime expressed her opinion.

Judging from her look of mixed feelings, she seemed to be having trouble deciding whether to feel surprised or impressed.

Part 2

After school today, Hal planned to go to SAURU's branch at Mirokudou as usual.

But prior to leaving school, he made a visit to the underground of the library building.

All books and enchanted artifacts from the previous Mansion had been moved over.

Hal came here because he wanted to make a quick confirmation. As usual, he brought Hazumi along.

The floor being used as a substitute storeroom was as large as four classrooms. There was already a line of steel shelves set up in place. Placed haphazardly on the shelves were old swords and various weapons, metallic objects, ornaments, ancient texts and scrolls, etc. At a casual glance, one could easily mistake them for piles of junk.

In fact, the value of these objects was probably no different from junk for people with no interest in antiques and ancient artifacts.

Without exception, they were either filthy, damaged or covered in rust. Esthetically, they were quite poor in appearance. Holding a catalog in his hand, Hal looked at these odds and ends.

"I'm told that there was originally a plan to assign someone like a curator to manage these things properly."

"Why didn't it happen?"

Hazumi asked while following Hal closely. Hal shrugged.

"The collection apparently includes 'certain cursed objects.' Two curators, who were not easy to hire, I tell you, died inexplicably one after another."

"I-I see..."

"Although SAURU has disposed of the cursed objects afterwards, the position of curator has remained vacant ever since. And the collection has been left neglected in storage without anyone to care for them."

"I had no idea of this at all..."

"Simply locating a specific item here is already a ton of work."

"U-Umm, please go ahead and tell me if there's any way I can help, no matter how."

The aspiring assistant and underclassman declared firmly, but Hal shook his head.

"This job requires knowledge and appraisal-type magic. It's too soon for you, Shirasaka."

"I see... In that case, please at least allow me to make coffee for you."

"Yeah. Thanks in advance."

As soon as Hal finished speaking, Hazumi smiled and answered "Yes!"

That radiant smile on its own was already enough to make him feel as though the dim lighting had brightened by 30%.

If this pure-hearted underclassman were to pour tea for him, the soothing effect could very well increase his work efficiency to 120% or more.

Hal nodded secretly to himself, but on the side, Hazumi's expression turned slightly gloomy.

"By the way, Senpai, may I ask a question?"

"Oh sure. Why are you asking like this all of a sudden?"

"This time, it's about what is within my power. Senpai, I asked you last time, hoping you could make me and Minadzuki able to use the rune's power..."

"Well—Uh, that's also too soon for you, Shirasaka."

"B-But it's just trying it out once like in Nee-sama's case."

After the battle against Pavel Galad, Hazumi had been zealously requesting Hal to entrust the rune's power to her as well.

Hal had declined her, citing the reason that "it was a power that must not be recklessly passed onto others."

However, Hal felt certain in his mind. In Hazumi's case, she would most likely be fine.

Perhaps this underclassman also had a faint feeling that she would succeed? Hence, she was persistent in pestering him regarding the issue, contrary to her characteristic tact...

"For better or worse, that rune's power is far too strong. But right now, there's no pressing need to fight, so it's best not to mess around with it for no reason."

In any case, Hal glossed over the issue and refused her.

One day, he would still need to make a decision, but wouldn't it be nice to enjoy the remaining time until then? Hal thought to himself.

Towering next to the library, the clubs building was a conglomeration of rooms for cultural clubs.

Inside the Literature Club on the third floor, Asya was face to face with her "teacher." Amazingly, this was the exact same moment when Haruga Haruomi and Shirasaka Hazumi were entering the underground of the library.

"Hmph, to think that Haruga guy is getting so close to a middle school girl..."

President M was the mysterious character who commanded more solemnity in her presence than a teacher despite being a mere high school student.

Leading all members of the Literature Club, the UFO Research Club, the Drama Club, the Mass Media Research Club and the Science Insider Club as

their president, she was the eccentric, a hundred and forty kilograms by visual estimates, and "mother."

As a side note, she was dressed like a housewife today in a cooking apron with a white kerchief.

"Y-Yeah. I can't believe a pure and innocent girl with a promising future is addressing Haruomi as her 'Senpai'!"

"It would be dangerous if that is the case. The girl could very well have fallen to Haruga's paws."

"Eh? But in my view, I don't think Haruomi, a textbook case of a herbivorous personality, would have the guts to do that."

"Fool. Once you strip off the veneer of skin, his body is a mass of lust inside. I dare guarantee you that he is surprisingly lustful to the core despite appearances."

"Huh, lust? Is that the portal into his body!?"

Asya instantly panicked after listening to President M's profound warning.

"W-What should I do at a time like this? From a humane perspective, it'd be wrong to put drawing pins in Hazumi-san's indoor shoes, so doesn't that mean I have to bash Haruomi's head with a board eraser!?"

"Hmm, the issue of having a rival is truly a tricky matter."

"Please give me some advice on this front."

"You have no other recourse but to spend time alone with Haruga as much as possible, right? Besides, as you are now, you don't have a snowball's chance in hell of winning even if you confront that Hazumi girl in a direct duel."

"Oww!"

After dealing the killing blow to Asya, President M added as an afterthought, "Next up, you will have to accept that course, right? The lecture on the dark techniques of love that will enable you to overtake your rivals and strike the target accurately like a sniper."

"There's that kind of course? Why didn't you teach me earlier?"

"Because you can't even manage the basics of the basics. Even if you learned these skills at the current stage, you won't be able to apply them flexibly. Wouldn't they end up causing you to self-destruct instead?"

Despite President M's tireless lecturing, Asya smiled coolly with a "hmph."

Asya felt touched by President M's care and concern, but she was a girl who had fought on various battlefields all over the world after all. A trial of this level should be possible to surmount no matter what.

"Please don't belittle me. Compared to the month of harsh training I endured at a Nevada military camp, this sort of thing is nothing."

"Here you go again~ Confessing that sort of depressing past... Whatever. Then I shall let you have a go."

After sighing deeply, President M spoke up, "You are currently attending a group date. With equally balanced genders, there are a total of ten participants."

"Okay."

"However, among the men, only one of them can be considered outstanding. Right now, the five women are vying viciously in secret for the seat beside him. Very well, what are you going to do!?"

"I get it. This is a simulation exercise the same as usual."

"Indeed. However, you may not poison the other women."

"Like hell anyone'd do that."

Once the question's intent was figured out, there was nothing to be afraid of.

Asya instantly thought of the best tactical choice.

"I will drug the male target, using a muscle relaxant to render him weak and powerless. Swiftly approaching him while he is unable to resist, I will take him outside under the pretext of looking after him. I am free to do with him as I please from that point onwards. With that, victory is all but guaranteed!"

"Great, you fail~~ Looks like it's still too soon for you to graduate from the basics lecture."

"Ehhh!?"

After school, Juujouji Orihime visited the cultural clubs building.

Although she came to the UFO Research Club on the third floor, there was no one in the room. However, she already knew her classmate Haruga Haruomi would be absent. She had heard that he was apparently going with her cousin Hazumi somewhere to do something...

Orihime sat down on a pipe chair in the clubroom and sighed.

She had never experienced this type of despondency before. She found it difficult to accept no matter what.

Just as Orihime was fully occupied, dealing with the "despondency" in her heart, the clubroom's door opened. Dressed in a cooking apron, President M walked in.

"Oh my, you have come. If you are looking for the famished foreign student, she already left fifteen minutes ago or so."

"No, I did not come to find Asya-san. There is something I would like to discuss with you today... Oh, it's not about me, but something troubling a friend of mine."

Orihime hastily added the last explanation in an attempt to misdirect.

As a result, President M went "hmm," exhaled through her nose, shrugged and said, "Oh I see, I see. So it is your female friend who is caught in the dilemma of a love triangle."

"You are correct, but lately, it has actually evolved into a four-sided relationship... My friend's cousin and the boy have gotten close."

"...Oh?"

"My friend thinks there is nothing wrong here, per se, but every time she hears about her cousin's intimacy with the boy, she feels very despondent inside."

"Despondency stemming from jealousy."

"Y-Yes. Hence she could not help but gripe unnecessarily, yet loathe herself for behaving this way..."

Taking this chance to vent her frustrations, Orihime did something uncharacteristic of her.

In other words, she slumped her shoulders in dejection. Seeing that, President M said, "In that case, how about this? Doesn't she have two choices before her? Either swallow all this 'despondency' and stay silent or step up to defeat the enemy."

"T-There is no enemy here!"

"What are you talking about? Whether cousins or friends, the truth of being romantic rivals is not going to change. If you are up for it, would you like me to provide you with a lecture course? A lecture on the dark techniques of love to seize initiative from multiple rivals."

Orihime widened her eyes upon hearing this unexpected offer.

"D-Dark?"

"A so-called good man or quality man refers to someone with a stable partner early on. In the vast majority of cases, those who remain single, despite what they have to offer, turn out to be poor choices."

"S-Sorry, but I dislike your way of putting things."

"To think you would make a 'good girl' response so naturally... Moving on, as the saying goes, you won't know unless you try it. Regardless whether you take my advice to heart, would you like to listen to my lectures? There are a variety to topics and settings, including the classroom, group outings, dates, the bedroom, traveling, marriage preparations, etc."

"Uh... I appreciate your kind gesture, but no thanks."

To be frank, Orihime was not entirely opposed to listening to the lectures for information's sake.

After brief contemplation, Orihime looked up with resolve and answered in no uncertain terms.

"Whether the boy or the cousin, both of them are important to me. Although such a notion might be excessively wishful thinking... Ultimately, it would be best if everyone could get along well."

Everyone getting along well. After speaking these words as a test, she found the despondency in her heart had eased slightly—

The surprisingly refreshing feeling compelled Orihime to nod firmly.

"Nothing less expected from the girl who is like the sun. A rather magnanimous speech."

Pulled back to reality, Orihime noticed that President M was gazing at her with eyes of wise resignation more than kindness, like a mother who would shrug and remark "no helping it" after listening to a child's willful fancies.

"But in your case, perhaps this sort of magnanimity might be the correct method. Simply by radiating light on its own, the sun is already the brightest existence."

"S-Sorry, but I am not that amazing—"

Just as Orihime was about to express her humility, she suddenly jumped in realization and hastily corrected herself.

"Umm, what we were just discussing is my friend, not my personal matter..."

"Oh—right right right. Indeed that is the case. However, since you, or rather, your friend is in possession of such outstanding power to begin with, yielding this level of compromise might be an appropriate arrangement."

"Arrangement?"

"Indeed indeed... After all, there exists an overwhelming gap in power between the few of you. All you need to do is maintain the status quo and no one else would have a chance. However, if the cousin were to go through a super awakening, perhaps it might evolve to a one-on-one duel..."

Halfway through, President M began to mutter ambiguously to herself.

"???"

Unable to hear what she was saying clearly, Orihime could not help but cock her head. Even so, the conversation just now had helped lift her spirits by an unbelievable degree.

Thanking President M while exiting the clubroom, Orihime then left the clubs building.

For the first time in a while, she walked with springing footsteps on her way out of the school. While making her way to the school gates, she saw Asya sitting on a bench. This senior witch, who was also a slightly awkward Georgian girl, had her head lowered with contemplative expression. Muttering to herself, she was uttering bizarre things.

"In that case, how about abducting Haruomi to imprison him in a lakeside mansion...? Using physical means to cut off his ties to society, thereby preventing Hazumi-san's interference, perhaps this might be a good method—"

Orihime repeated President M's earlier response.

In other words, she shrugged helplessly while gazing at Asya with eyes of leniency.

Then Orihime showed a faintly wry smile, approached the bench and said to her, "Asya-san, I will be heading over later to Haruga-san and Hazumi to help out with worked that was planned for today. If you are free, would you like to come along?"

"!? Are you serious, Orihime-san?"

After nodding at Asya, who had looked up in surprise, Orihime immediately took out her cellphone.

This was to call Hazumi to inform her that she was going to meet up with them presently.

Part 3

After visiting the library's underground level, Hal took Hazumi to ride the New Town Loop Line.

Their aim was to make an appearance at SAURU's branch office, Mirokudou, at Higashikomagata. Despite the shop's appearance as a used bookstore, the manager, who also served as the organization's contact, was frequently absent.

But today was different. Rare as it was, Kenjou Genya was present in the shop located on the fourth floor of a mixed tenant building.

"Hello, youngster. You arrived really soon, even though I only just texted you in the daytime."

This was a young man who could be described as handsome without exaggeration. But for some reason, there was no "wildness" in his demeanor despite his stubble, crumpled shirt and tie, etc.

Rather, it would be better to describe him as giving off a first impression of "carefreeness."

Kenjou placed a small, A4-sized corrugated cardboard box on the checkout counter. This box was made of pH-neutral cardboard used for storing ancient texts. The object Haru had ordered was inside it.

During the daytime today, Hal had received a text on his cellphone informing him of his order's arrival.

"Because I'm a high schooler, I'm basically free after classes."

"Isn't that nice? I'd like to stay cooped up in this unfrequented used bookstore every day to enjoy times of leisure as much as possible in a celebration of sloth."

"E-Excuse me... Are you usually handling SAURU's work outside?"

The one who interjected with a question was the middle schooler, the youngest person present.

Although Kenjou and Hazumi were mutually acquainted, they were not intimate at all. Since the middle schooler witch who had defended Tokyo New Town for many years was a VIP, her interactions with SAURU's members were limited to technical consultants at most.

However, despite her reserved and polite personality, Hazumi was also highly inquisitive and bold.

Timidly yet clearly, she asked what she wanted to find out. Hal did not know if Kenjou was impressed with this attitude of hers, but he grinned and nodded.

"Yeah. Within SAURU, this New Town branch of ours is relatively small in scale. Since I'm the only staff stationed permanently here, I have to go out to handle all sorts of miscellaneous tasks.... However, things seem to have started to change in this area."

"Change? What do you mean by that, Kenjou-san?"

Ignoring Hal's impolite tone of voice, the part-time used bookstore manager replied, "You see, didn't the Trans-Pacific Area's Shootdown Ace arrive half a month ago?"

"You mean the daughter of Greg-sensei—Master Gregory?"

"In fact, she is still at New Town and also nonchalantly~ interfering in the organization's affairs. Currently, she has become SAURU's highest authority in eastern Japan. Furthermore, she is skillfully scheming to increase the New Town branch's manpower."

"Then what about Hiiragi-san?"

"Hiiragi-neesan has become Miss Gregory's direct subordinate of sorts. Oh dear, thanks to this black ship, it looks like I'll be able to tend to the shop full-time in the future."

"Yes, because of increased manpower..."

"Miss Gregory apparently intends to turn New Town into Japan's—no, the entire Trans-Pacific Area's—frontline against the dragons. These preparations are probably made in anticipation of that."

"..."

After receiving his goods together with the unexpected news, Hal left the shop together with Hazumi.

Along the way to Higashikomagata Station, Hazumi's cellphone received a call.

"That's a wrap for today's work."

"Then it's all good. Let's all have dinner together."

In the end, the four of them, Hal, Orihime, Asya and Hazumi met up in front of Higashikomagata Station.

Although the only item left on today's itinerary was going home, due to the rare opportunity, the entire group entered a nearby family restaurant to have dinner.

Hal had heard that Hazumi rarely ate out except when working as a witch. However, after phoning home to tell them she was accompanied by her cousin Orihime, she obtained her family's consent to join in.

Perhaps because such experiences were rare for her, Hazumi was smiling more radiantly than usual.

"Fufufufu. I am overjoyed to be eating out with friends like this."

"After this, let's head over to my most recommended Chinese restaurant nearby. It's a great place where you can eat authentic Cantonese cuisine imported from Hong Kong, and very few people know of it."

"Oh, that's the shop where they sell deep-fried scorpions."

Just as Hal nodded and concurred with Asya's suggestion, Hazumi widened her eyes.

"Scorpions are edible!?"

"They're crunchy and taste great. Many people like to use them as snacks to go along with beer. It's very popular."

"A-Although it sounds a bit scary, I'm quite curious..."

"However, that might be setting the hurdle too high for a Japanese girl who's just trying out Cantonese cuisine. As for Juujouji, anything goes."

"W-Why am I dismissed like that!? Haruga-kun!"

"Because you are strong and brave, Juujouji. You look like the type who'll eat anything."

"Although I know that you are probably praising me, I still feel a bit indignant about being described that way..."

Possibly due to gathering together without a purpose, the four of them chatted about inconsequential topics.

This made Hal feel surprisingly delighted. Perhaps it was a reaction to the past half a month of thoughts occupied by dragons, runes of Ruruk Soun and the like.

In addition, Hal could also sense that Orihime and Asya's smiles were more cheerful than usual.

Hal could not help but feel a bit worried due to seeing the two girls show gloomy expressions on a frequent basis lately. However, they both seemed very happy tonight.

After that, the four of them parted ways at the station.

Orihime and Hazumi were taking the Loop Line in the Shin-Kiba direction, so they went through the turnstiles together.

On the other hand, Hal and Asya were headed in the opposite direction towards Kanegafuchi. Hastily, just as they were about to pass through the turnstiles, Asya pulled Hal by the sleeve of his uniform.

"H-Haruomi, w-would you like to visit a restaurant later to see beautiful night scenery!?"

"...We just had dinner, after all. Making me accompany you for a second meal would be asking too much."

It looked like his childhood friend had not eaten her fill yet.

After the cautious rejection, Asya suddenly realized something in alarm and changed her tune.

"D-Do over, forget what I just said. How about going on an evening spin, just the two of us—"

"I'd like to read the book I bought from Kenjou-san, so give me a break tonight, okay..."

"Do over again! Uh, right. Yeah, it's about Rushalka. I'd like to have a proper discussion with you about her, so could you come with me?"

In the end, Hal and Asya went to Kogetsu Academy at Ryougoku.

Since they needed a wide area to do their "work," the school was an excellent choice. Having passed 9pm, chances of encountering anyone in school were very low as well.

Hal and Asya climbed over a wall together and successfully sneaked into the school's premises.

No lights were on apart from the staff room in the school building. Hal took out a flashlight from his bag. It was a stick-shaped flashlight the size of a ballpoint pen with the advantage of taking up little space.

Hal always carried handy tools of this sort purely due to his nature as a treasure hunter.

Relying on the faint light, Hal and Asya reached the sports ground. Just by looking up at the night sky, the 70% waxing gibbous moon could be seen glowing faintly between the clouds.

"Then I'll summon her."

Asya suddenly extended her right hand with her palm facing the ground.

Next, the figure of a blue-white magic beast was projected on the sports ground's white sand. The wyvern leviathan whose body measured dozens of meters long. Naturally, this was Rushalka.

Despite some fuzziness, it was a vivid image akin to a photo taken by a camera.

Curled into a ball, Rushalka was in deep slumber. What Asya was trying to present visually was not the blue leviathan's physical body but her soul—The state of the serpent's spiritual body.

Bathed under moonlight, the ground was substituting for a screen.

"It's already impossible to wake her up by calling quietly. Recently, Rushalka's mind has remained in deep sleep the whole time. In the near future, I fear she will enter eternal slumber."

"And earlier, her state of health had improved slightly..."

Through the infusion of dragonslaying power, Rushalka had exhibited a brief but temporary recovery.

But after the battle against Pavel Galad, her condition had worsened again. Presumably, fighting a successor of dragonslaying power would take such a massive toll on her health, right?

"But unlike back in early spring, we now have hope for a cure."

"The birth ritual, right?"

"Yes. Since Hazumi-san's Minadzuki—even a 'serpent' that heavily injured—could be revived, surely Rushalka can also be restored. You must lend a hand, Haruomi."

"Sure, as long as that weird self-styled devil agrees."

"Making her agree is your job, Haruomi."

"Besides, the magical power needed by the ritual also needs to be secured. Since it apparently has high requirements in both quantity and concentration, it's not a ritual that can be done at a moment's notice."

"...Haruomi, don't tell me you're reluctant to do it?"

As expected of the childhood friend, her perceptiveness was truly sharp. Asya narrowed her eyes with suspicion.

This was because she had sensed Haruga Haruomi's feelings on the matter through his subtle wording and indifferent attitude. Hal shrugged and voiced his thoughts.

"I want to do it. If Rushalka could recover successfully, that'd be very encouraging. But with that, the life in seclusion I've always wanted to live will become very distant..."

"Life in seclusion—Ahhh, Haruomi, you still haven't given up on that plan?"

Asya widened her eyes in surprise.

"You're clearly someone in possession of a dragonslaying rune, you know? It might be a bit much coming from me, but let alone living a peaceful life in retirement, there's a very high chance you won't die a natural death at the end of a long life..."

"You are so correct that it's not even funny."

"No helping it. This is what it means to be chosen for a hero's destiny."

Hearing Hal's calm murmurings, Asya smiled faintly.

There would be no end to it once they started worrying seriously about somber matters. Hence, since a long time ago, the two of them would deliberately make jokes out of similar issues and take the chance to engage in frivolity.

More than likely, his childhood friend intended to do the same this time too.

Treating it as conversational fuel was probably in consideration of maintaining Hal's mental balance.

"Never mind. If that's the case, I'll shelve this for now. After all, it's a problem that needs to be confronted sooner or later, no matter how unwilling, besides—"

At this moment, Asya glanced at Hal as though she had something to say.

"It looks like you've been pulling all-nighters lately."

"I discovered an RPG dating back to the era of 8-bit CPUs that has been re-released on the cellphone, so playing it has been addictive. It's the kind of game with only blocks of pixels moving around, lacking not only movies but even sound effects."

Hal explained with a random excuse while suppressing a yawn.

Due to having too many things to do lately, he was only getting three hours or so of sleep a day.

"Like stripping all money and items from a newly created character then kicking him out of the party, or going to the casino to make a killing using secret skills, or amassing enough gold to overflow the bank and using it to buy the strongest equipment, or buying out all stat-raising potions, I've tried out many things that can't be done in modern games."

"A hero's party that's out to save the world shouldn't be doing those kinds of things!"

"Oh dear, that's because there's no hero in my party. Besides, asking this mere group of four or five to save the world is an overly ambitious quest in the first place."

"That's because the people who work hard seriously in these areas are the ones who become heroes."

While chatting, Asya casually waved her hand.

Rushalka's figure vanished from the ground. Then Asya remained by Hal's side as though nothing had happened. With a calm and composed expression on her face, she did not bring up topics related to "serpents" again.

Sure enough, this ease of getting along was achievable only by the childhood friend whose fate was inexplicably entwined with his.

There was the sense of comfort that the other party would still be able to sense one's thoughts even without spelling everything out. A relaxing atmosphere without worry. Hal was truly grateful for all this.

However, at this moment, an unfamiliar girl approached the chatting duo.

A blonde Caucasian, roughly sixteen or seventeen in age. Despite the location of a school sports ground, she was in casual attire.

She was dressed in a low-cut black one-piece dress with a loose-fitting silhouette. Her hands were clad in gloves of white lace.

The combination of white and black gave an extremely mysterious impression.

"Greetings, Asya. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Haruga-san."

The girl in the dress greeted them then bowed gracefully.

In terms of facial features, she was very pretty too. A young beauty with a slender oval face. On her delicate and beautiful face, like an antique doll's, a gentle smile surfaced.

A sheltered young lady, raised in an aristocratic household—

That was the kind of airs the girl exuded just by smiling. In truth, her earlier greeting was also elegant and gracious.

"My apologies for my tardy greeting, but please listen to my explanation. Ever since arriving in Japan, I have been buried in work. I almost thought I was going to die from overwork. However, my dear friend Asya would be saying to me with a smile, 'I don't mind at all. You've worked hard, Luna♪', wouldn't you?"

"H-Here you go again with this sort of act, even after such a long absence..."

Asya frowned and stared at the blonde girl.

Then in an extremely reluctant tone of voice, she said to Hal gloomily, "Let me introduce her. This is Luna Francois Gregory, a master mage under SAURU as well as being Chief Researcher of the Trans-Pacific Area. We're acquaintances."

"My goodness, Asya. I shan't accept anything less than the description of friend with the word 'great' in front of it."

Luna Francois smiled tenderly while chiding her fellow witch.



Part 4

"In any case, this is my current title."

Saying that, Luna Francois extended her business card.

This was an official business card that Hal and Asya seldom used. On white paper, the SAURU logo was printed. Above the row of Latin alphabetic characters reading "Luna Francois Gregory" were the words "Acting Branch Chief, Kantou Branch."

"Acting... Branch Chief?"

"Indeed. The former branch chief expressed the intent to retire yesterday, citing family and health reasons. Consequently, I was nominated to take over the duties for now, inexperienced as I am. Fufu."

"Hold~ it right there!"

In front of Hal, whose face was filled with doubt, Asya retorted against the smiling Acting Branch Chief.

"Why would you be nominated for that kind of post, Luna!? You're clearly an outsider who just came over from America, without any connections to Japan at all!"

"Well, that is because no one surpasses both my rank in SAURU and my level as a witch."

"Going with that line of reasoning, I'm at the same level as you, Luna."

"Then it is probably a matter of character—Oh, excuse me. I certainly do not mean to say that your character is inferior to mine, Asya. Nevertheless, there is ultimately a difference between commoners and those who are born with leadership potential..."

"Y-You haven't changed at all, always blowing your own horn surreptitiously."

Luna Francois delivered her words as though with great compassion, but Asya scowled with displeasure.

"Either way, there's no doubt that you were acting on your own as usual, making under-the-table deals or exerting pressure to enact ploys to make your own work easier..."

"You keep doing this, Asya, unilaterally denigrating others with such baseless judgments."

Luna Francois lowered her eyelids mournfully.

The side view of her melancholic face conveyed a sense of martyrdom like that of a heroine in a tragedy. Seeing her like that, Hal's silver-haired childhood friend scoffed in defiance. So that was how things were.

Hal nodded. He now understood the kind of relationship between them.

Apparently, Luna Francois' personality was diametrically opposite to that of Asya, the feral prodigy.

"Haruga-san, I came over to speak to you as the organization's representative—as SAURU's representative. Bluntly stated, the main agenda here is to amend your contract."

"By contract, don't tell me you mean my contract with SAURU?"

Luna Francois suddenly turned the conversation over to him, stunning Hal for a moment.

His current relationship with SAURU was very simple. Apart from obligations of secrecy, jobs were all piecewise assigned on short-term contracts. Using business organization as an analogy, it would correspond to something like a contract employee.

"Indeed. Haruga-san, you are currently in an extremely special position, aren't you?"

"Well, after all, I've had this weird rune foisted on me..."

"In light of that, I have prepared contract money, long-term contracts, high annual salary, preferential treatment and various other conditions to negotiate with you. Since the situation could evolve to a very complicated state, I have made arrangements in advance to silence various Japanese entities, New Town's government agencies first and foremost. As a result, we should be able to sit down quietly to have a proper discussion."

"Don't tell me that you secured the branch chief title to facilitate this sort of thing?"

"Fufufu, you are free to exercise your imagination in this regard."

Her smile, more calm than necessary, convinced Hal of his suspicions.

With this, Hal figured it out. He had found things unbelievable for a while now. In the roughly half a month since the battle against Galad, no one had contacted him, whether SAURU or influential people in New Town. Thanks to that, he was able to focus his full attention on handling sundry chores and spending time with Hazumi—However, countless bargaining had likely taken place behind the scenes.

It was probably because these matters had settled down that Luna Francois finally made her appearance.

"Naturally, I won't pull out a contract immediately for you to sign. Today is merely for me to deliver a brief greeting. Besides, you also have the option of treating your acquired power as an asset to enter negotiations with the anti-dragon organizations of various nations."

"An option huh?"

"Furthermore, through flexible application of your power, capable even of striking dragons dead, you could try setting a goal of conquering the world or some such."

"I haven't gotten to the point of having such notions."

"Fufufu. In other words, you have considered everything apart from that."

"..."

"Well, you do have the freedom to cut off all ties and live as a hermit, after all. It is a decision that ought to be made by you. However, SAURU will do everything it can to prepare a tempting offer. This is what I came to tell you tonight."

Winking seductively, Luna Francois delivered the above speech.

"So she's currently SAURU's highest authority in the Kantou region?"

"Someone else will probably take over soon as the new branch chief. However, developments will surely unfold such that no opposition should come to Miss Gregory's will."

It was the following day after the encounter with Luna Francois on Kogetsu Academy's sports ground.

After school, Hal had gone straight home without loitering elsewhere. Since his plan for today was reading, Hazumi was not by his side either. However, Orihime came to visit him alone when evening arrived.

This conversation was taking place after Hal had invited his classmate, who had already changed into casual wear, into his living room.

Incidentally, Orihime was dressed in a white blouse with a loose and frilly hem paired with light-gray pants, a simple choice of wardrobe. However, due to her natural gifts, this level of attire was beautiful enough already. This followed the same principle as how professional models could look good in clothing sold by major retailers.

"By the way, Juujouji, why did you come to my house today?"

"Shouldn't you be asking this question before revealing a secret association's latest personnel news? Whatever."

Nonchalantly expressing her expectations for Hal's social sense, Orihime put down a hand-carried paper bag on the table. Speaking of which, she had been holding the bag the whole time since entering the front door.

"Here you go. If you could express exaggerated joy towards these things, I would be very pleased as the one who provided them to you."

"Golden bean-jam wafers?"

"Wrong. Just ordinary refreshments. My domestic helper, Granny Yamamoto, made them together with me. Roughly half-half in proportion, I guess."

What Orihime took out from the bag were a number of tupperware containers.

Urged by Orihime's gaze to open them, Hal did as instructed. The contents included octopus, turnip, boiled ganmodoki, fried egg, burdock cooked kinpura style, tsukudani, pickled turnip, rice balls, etc. Overall, they were simple yet delicious dishes.

"What I've brought are practically all pre-made food that can be kept, so don't be shy and accept everything. Please, you really need to replenish your nutrients."

"I'm quite touched, but why so suddenly...?"

After puzzling over Orihime's sudden gesture of care, Hal was suddenly struck by the light of inspiration.

"Juujuuji, could it be that our close proximity lately has caused you to fall for me, which is why you're showing concern for my health with that type of maidenly airs—!?"

"D-Don't be ridiculous! I am simply concerned for you as a friend!"

"Darn, I knew it. What a shame."

"..."

"That's odd? Did I say something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing. Haruga-kun, you are functioning normally as usual."

Although Orihime looked a bit offended, she had personally insisted that Hal had gotten the wrong idea.

Since there was no need to dwell further on this question, Hal used his fingers to pick up a piece of ganmodoki and popped it into his mouth. Juices

flowed out as soon as he bit down. Richly flavored to the core, it was very delicious.

"Mm, it's very delicious. Thank you."

"This type of comment from you won't be winning any invitations to cooking shows, but I'm glad you like it. Besides, Haruga-kun, I doubt you have had chances to offer compliments like now."

"..."

"Listen up, even if just going through the motions, I think you should deny it at least."

"Maybe you're right. By the way, I'll ask you this again. Why did you suddenly visit with refreshments?"

"It's because of what you said yesterday, don't you remember? When eating that failure of a hamburger steak at the family restaurant, you whispered 'It's been so long since I last ate proper food like this.'"

"Now that you mention it, I really could've said that."

"Let me ask a question for reference. What did you have for dinner the day before yesterday?"

"Bread from a convenience store, it's right over there. I opened it and ate it directly without toasting it. If memory serves me right, I ate two slices?"

Hal was the kind of person who lost his appetite when busy.

Recently, even at the school cafeteria, he would often order just a bowl of udon or ramen noodles. The Japanese-style hamburger steak meal set last night was "normal food" he had not eaten for quite a while.

Meanwhile, after listening to Hal's confession, Orihime sighed and said softly, "You are more undisciplined than I imagined..."

"No no no. Japanese bread has cream and salt added, so it's good enough."

"It feels like your intake will be just right only if yours and Asya-san's are added together and divided by three... I can't believe you're living on this kind of diet. Bringing refreshments over really turned out to be the right choice."

"Sorry, it looks like I've worried you."

"It's okay. We're friends after all. But Haruga-kun, I heard from Hazumi that you've been busy with this and that lately. You're not getting much sleep at night either, right? You need to watch your health."

"..."

Suddenly confronted with such advice, Hal did not know how to respond. Having lived alone for such a long time, he was unused to receiving care and concern over this sort of issue.

As though reading the troubled thoughts in his mind, Orihime casually changed the subject.

"Lately, Haruga-kun, I've begun to understand the differences between you and Asya-san."

"Differences?"

"Yes. Asya-san is actually someone who does things without any planning, isn't she? I don't know if I can call it going with the flow, but it feels like she is very good at adapting to changing situations."

"Yeah... You finally noticed?"

During battle situations, Asya always remained calm, issuing orders decisively.

However, if one were to ask whether she had carefully considered the big picture, the answer was actually no. Hal's childhood friend lived on mottos such as "fights are organic" or "think about what will happen ten minutes later when those ten minutes are up." This would be rare talent for a warrior or the captain of a combat unit, but it meant she would never be strategist material.

"What's amazing about Asya is her ability to come up with the most suitable solution through that kind of method. I don't know if I should call it a beast's sixth sense? Or a genius' intuition that no one can imitate?"

"But I was surprised that you are someone who works diligently on prior preparation and training!"

"Really? If possible, I want things to be easy all the way."

Hal shrugged after listening to Orihime's candid comment.

He did not have the aspirations to be the kind of behind-the-scenes worker who enjoyed preparatory work in a grounded and modest manner. If possible, given Hal's personality, he would rather be the grasshopper than the ant. However, Orihime continued unfazed.

"I don't know what you are doing, but no matter what, you have to pay attention to getting enough nutrition and sleep, because not just me but even Hazumi is very worried about you too."

"..."

"By the way, how about asking Kagutsuchi-san for help?"

After hearing Orihime's suggestion, Hal summoned his "magic wand" to his right hand.

It was the magic gun of steel decorated with gold and also the personalized weapon that had shown Hal a certain dream multiple times, thereby warning him.

"Although that is what she suggested, what do you think?"

Hal stroked the gun's body while concentrating.

This was for the sake of seeking spiritual energy while guided by the magic wand—Got it. A non-human presence occupying a corner of the living room. It belonged to the former queen of the dragons, a little girl who called herself the devil.

She probably noticed Hal searching for her.

The air began to drift and a girl dressed in a red kimono appeared in a corner of the living room.

"Hmph. You have apparently started to engage in bizarre behavior recently."

Her haughty manner unchanged, Hinokagutsuchi said in taunting manner, "Then I shall ask you in return, do you intend to beg for my pity?"

"If it's a yes or no question, then the answer is no. You're the kind of self-styled devil that only helps out on whim without even demanding payment, right? The consequences are too frightening, so I can't ask you for favors. However—"

Using this excellent chance, Hal probed the summoned ghost for information.

"I've got something to confirm with you."

"What is it? If it were to interest me, it is not like I could not answer you."

"The Witch Mansion at Shin-Kiba was where I met you. I was wondering if there might be any other factors involved apart from chance?"

"Oh...?"

"I'll be blunt, even though you might get the wrong idea. It seems more like—an encounter by design rather than chance."

"What an uncharacteristic comment given your personality. It also sounds like a lunatic's delusions. Have you grown fond of believing in fated encounters?"

"Of course not. If anything, it's more like theoretical inevitability."

Instead of answering, Hinokagutsuchi sneered "hmph" and disappeared.

Hal nodded. During the moment of Hinokagutsuchi's ambiguous response, Hal had realized the answer instead.

"Thank you, Juujouji. It's all thanks to you that I remembered her. I now feel slightly confident in what I'm currently doing."

"W-What did you figure out from just now?"

Just as Orihime was taken aback by unfolding developments...

Her bag began to ring from an incoming call on her cellphone. She instantly took out her phone, only to see a young woman's face displayed on the LCD screen.

It was a photo of SAURU's technical consultant whom Hal also recognized, Hiiragi Yukari.

"Juujouji speaking. What's the matter, Yukari-san?"

'Bad news as usual. Orihime-san, where are you right now?'

"Haruga-kun's home."

'...'

That was how Orihime replied after setting the cellphone to speaker mode and putting it on a table.

From other side of the call, Hiiragi-san calmed down obviously.

'Haruomi-kun, don't tell me you've finally entered puberty and so you're trying to get close to Orihime-san or something...? I am truly touched...'

"Although I've no idea why you're touched, can I ask a question?"

Interrupted by Hal, Hiiragi-san answered, "Yes, go ahead."

"Regarding SAURU's personnel matters, Hiiragi-san, are you really going to be the next chief of the Kantou branch?"

'—!? Where did you hear this news from!?'

"It simply occurred to me in a moment of brilliance. I heard from Kenjou-san that you've been getting along with Miss Gregory lately, so I tried to fish for confirmation. I'm the one who jumped in surprise to find out my guess was correct."

'Well, it is just as you imagined, thanks to her connections.'

After saying that candidly, Hiiragi-san sighed.

'A major increase in monthly salary is good and all, but it's really a pain now that I can't visit the scenes of incidents at will ever again. By the way, may I

continue and finish delivering the bad news? Not long from now, a flock of Raptors will be invading Tokyo Bay. Numbers are estimated to be two hundred at least.'

At least three digits! Hal and Orihime looked at each other. Flocks of flying Raptors attacking the earth in "dragon strikes" normally did not exceed twenty.

"The scale is quite shocking... Why did the TPDO allow such a massive number of Raptors to approach Japanese soil?"

Actually, Hal could already guess a certain answer. Nevertheless, he still sought confirmation on purpose.

As expected, Hal received the answer just as he had predicted.

'Reasons are unknown. However, it is highly likely that some sort of magic was used by elites to interfere with reconnaissance. Involved parties all share the same opinion.'

Next, Hiiragi-san added, 'In fact, I was just about to call Haruomi-kun too. This is a message from Miss Gregory: "If possible, could you accompany me to watch 'our friends' in battle?"'

Raptors numbering three digits at least, combined with foreseeable intervention from elite dragons.

It looked like the *grace period* for Hal and friends was gradually heading to an end.

Chapter 2 - The Girl of White Descends

Part 1

There was a faint smell of burning in the air.

Pavel Galad could detect the presence of flames mixed in the atmosphere.

Those were no ordinary flames. Instead, this foul odor belonged to discharged flames that were stored within the bodies of dragons. Were there others of his kind lurking in these lands?

Galad scanned his surroundings with a sharp gaze. This was a city belonging to humans, very close to the sea.

Indeed—

Unbeknownst to Galad as a dragon, his current location was actually the residential district of Gasai in Tokyo New Town's Edogawa Ward.

He was currently walking along the sidewalk of a wide four-lane road.

"Hmm..."

The residential district was very quiet. Pedestrians and passing cars were few, without the slightest shadow that could resemble a dragon.

However, he could not lower his guard simply because of that. Currently, he was hunted prey. Prior to becoming dragon kings, inheritors of dragonslaying power were known as "Tyrannos" and would face hostility from other dragons. Galad hoped to avoid encountering fellow dragons as much as possible.

Still, there were probably very few dragons capable of seeing through his disguise...

Pavel Galad was originally a giant silver-white dragon, but currently, he had taken the form of a human young man.

This was in order to hide among human settlements. He was even dressed in human shoes and clothing including a black open-collared shirt and chino pants. All this was to avoid attracting attention. Using a Hypnosis spell to put a man of similar build to sleep, he had stolen these articles of clothing. However—

"This again huh..."

Sensing gazes from young women, Galad frowned. Although he had taken human form to avoid attracting attention, for some reason, he still remained the focus of many gazes, especially from young human women.

—Actually, the reason was exceedingly simple.

He had transformed into a silver-haired handsome young man featuring a pale complexion with a tall and slim build.

This appearance was not only extremely conspicuous but also particularly prone to drawing female gazes.

Be that as it may, such a principle would not exist within the realm of a warrior dragon's imagination. Galad spurred his feeble body to quicken his pace. Simply doing that was making him pant and his heart—or rather, his heartmetal—to throb painfully.

"Has that girl noticed the power of dragonbane here...?"

Despite passing by him, the girl continued to follow Galad's back with her gaze.

This harassing gaze was causing Galad's thoughts to run wild. The Rune of the Sword residing in his right palm was precisely why other dragons were targeting him.

Elite dragons devoted their lives to seek the power of dragonbane.

As soon as they found out the Sword's whereabouts, they would either kill Galad or simply take away that right hand, wouldn't they? They would then proceed to conduct a magic ritual in an attempt to "transplant" the power of dragonbane.

It was said that this magic was extremely difficult, with a success rate less than 40%...

However, if he wanted to avoid that kind of fate, he really should get away from here as quickly as possible.

"But right now, I cannot leave this city..."

Galad gritted his teeth and stared at the western sky.

In the distance, the streets of the Old Tokyo Concession could be seen. Most imposing of all was the triangular prism of pure black, towering at over a height of a thousand meters.

It was the gigantic structure called a Monolith by humans and known to dragonkind as a "wedge."

"Were this city not filled with miasma, this body of mine would not be able to walk freely or even perform magic at all..."

At this moment, loudspeakers in the streets began a broadcast.

'Emergency evacuation order. Lesser dragons are invading Tokyo Bay's airspace. All residents, please remain calm and head to your designated shelter as quickly as possible—'

"Do-ra-go-n... Their word referring to the race of dragons, I suppose."

The female announcer's broadcast was replayed again and again.

A commotion began in the surroundings. Many vehicles driving on the road suddenly accelerated.

In contrast, many people also parked their cars on the roadside and began to head to shelter on foot. They were probably worried of traffic congestion later.

In addition, a large flood of humans surged out of houses, buildings and housing complexes in the residential district.

Thanks to regularly held evacuation exercises, the local residents were very familiar with escape routes. The people swiftly moved in the same direction without hesitation in their footsteps.

People of this era were already accustomed to the arrival of dragons.

Not only did they avoid panicking pointlessly, but they also evacuated in an organized and disciplined manner instead.

Even the children coming out of kindergartens were obediently following their teachers' directions.

—Entering the nearest elementary school like this, then returning to their rightful places after two or three hours when the evacuation order was lifted—

Although Galad had no idea, this was actually a common scene in lands where Raptors flew.

While residents in the vicinity were hiding, "serpents" serving as defenders would defeat the Raptors and eliminate threats to humanity. However, this preordained outcome was eventually going to be overturned—

And in the case of these lands, that would be today.

GAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

A Raptor roared while flying over the residential district.

"Kyahhhhhhhh!"

Just as a woman screamed, panic erupted within the crowd.

The people began to scramble and run as fast as they could, scattering in all directions. Some of the slower people found themselves helpless.

Even if people got knocked away, people fell down, people got stepped on, no one had the luxury of tending to others anymore.

Children in kindergarten uniforms cried and wailed as teachers tried everything they could to comfort them.

Meanwhile, the Raptor landed, ignoring the people in chaos.

Descending on the roofs of mixed tenant buildings, it spewed blue-white flames from its mouth. Once, twice, thrice, the fire kept coming. Within a blink of the eye, the residential district had turned into a sea of flames.

Looking down at this fiery blaze from atop the building, the Raptor called as loud as it could.

GAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

It was thoroughly reveling in the joys of destruction. Furthermore, its heart was filled with sadistic impulses to massacre the moving organisms below.

Tsk. Galad clicked his tongue, because he noticed that the winged lizard had also targeted him.

Clearly fighting would be a monumental burden for this currently feeble body—

But even so, he still could not stop the smile surfacing on the corners of his lips.

Due to persisting in a lifestyle of hiding and disguise, which did not suit his true nature, he had accumulated rage and frustration in his heart.

Finally a battle to enjoy after so long. Galad pressed his right hand against his chest, extracting magical power from his extremely frail heartmetal. The depths of his chest ached convulsively.

If a person were to stab an icepick into their heart, they might possibly experience the same kind of agony.

"O Jabones, curse your misfortune of appearing before me!"

The instant he yelled loudly, Galad extended his right palm towards the Raptor.

The center of his palm flashed with light. The brightness formed a rune consisting of a series of three Vs—the Rune of the Sword. This dragonslaying rune was fired in the form of a beam.

Unerringly, the Rune of the Sword pierced the winged lizard's chest.

This attack killed the Raptor instantly without even giving it the chance to scream. Immediately, it turned into stone, resulting in a silent statue on the roof of a building.

For dragons, their corpses turning into stone was equivalent to rigor mortis in humans after death.

Having emerged victorious, Galad smiled but he immediately fell to his knees, unable to bear the pain in his heart.

"However, the quantity of winged lizards seems unusual this time..."

Despite panting heavily, Galad still whispered quietly.

Wind was blowing from the sea's direction. Mixed within it were flames, the abnormally intense scent of unruly Jabones. Surely, an intense battle was taking place over there.

While feeling a sense of certainty, Galad groaned "urgh!"

His consciousness faded away gradually. This was the price he paid for using the Rune of the Sword in the current state of his body.

Part 2

Hal's home was located at Narihira Bridge in the Sumida Ward. The nearest helipad was on the Sumida River's shore, an airfield used in the event of disasters.

Hurrying there together with Orihime, Hal boarded the helicopter sent to pick them up.

As a large helicopter designed for naval minesweeping, it probably belonged to the JMSDF. The space in the fuselage was meant for transporting supplies. Despite being guests, Hal and Orihime had to sit in small seats akin to auxiliary seating on buses.

Hal and Orihime took their seats there, becoming part of the not so numerous cargo.

Amidst the thunderous roaring of the rotors, the helicopter flew swiftly, finally reaching the destination.

Offshore of Haneda in the Tokyo Bay—This was a stretch of ocean only ten-odd kilometers away from Haneda Airport.

Hal looked at Orihime who was sitting beside him. During the flight so far, the novice witch had kept her eyes closed to concentrate, because she was using Astral Link magic to send her partner Akuro-Ou to the scene while controlling remotely.

Roughly one kilometer ahead of them, the white fox-wolf was engaging in an aerial battle against dragons numbering in three digits at least.

Furthermore, neither Hazumi nor Minadzuki were present at Haneda's offshore waters.

This was because they were on standby at New Town's shore, prepared to handle Raptors at the water's edge.

"Juujouji, it's almost time for you to cancel remote control."

"Y-Yes..."

Orihime whispered in response to Hal's quiet reminder. Due to using Astral Link, she was in too deep of a trance.

At this moment, the helicopter lowered its altitude and landed on the deck of a large destroyer.

This ship class had a displacement of fifteen thousand tons. The deck was very spacious, allowing many helicopters to take off and land without issue. Waiting nearby, two JSMD crew members rushed over.

Since the door was already opened from outside, Hal took Orihime's hand and jumped off the helicopter.

Orihime slowly looked up and watched the aerial battle from the destroyers deck with a dazed look.

"Akuro-Ou...?"

Orihime's partner was jumping around strongly.

The nine-tailed fox-wolf, Akuro-Ou. Although her beautiful fur was white, it reflected red light when bathed under the sun's rays.

Akuro-Ou flew with agility as though swimming through the atmosphere. She was currently flying in a straight line, biting a certain Raptor's neck firmly.

The enemies were Raptors, commonly known as lesser dragons. They were about seven meters long in size.

In comparison, leviathans, most notably Akuro-Ou, only approached double the size of Raptors. If the situation evolved into a one-against-many melee mess, one would reason there was no way for her to win against Raptors.

Akuro-Ou's large and strong jaws easily crushed the Raptors' delicate necks.

However, the number of Raptors was estimated to be two hundred at least. Even taking them out one at a time like this, there would not be enough time.

Furthermore, many Raptors were ignoring Akuro-Ou, flying towards Tokyo on their own.

In order to strike down these Raptors, fighter jet squadrons belonging to the SDF and the TPDO were flying back and forth in the sky. An interception fleet was also firing artillery from the sea surface.

Surveying the chaotic battle offshore of Haneda, Orihime's gaze grew sharp.

Presumably fully recovered from her trance, she immediately yelled, "Akuro-Ou! Use fire magic to blow them all away!"

Akuro-Ou roared in response to her covenantee's call.

Kuohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Soaring through the sky, the white fox-wolf's entire body lit on fire, enveloped in crimson flames.

The flames exploded directly like fireworks, scattering in all directions from Akuro-Ou to incinerate everything. This was the result of her using the pseudo-divinity of Fire.

The shotgun blast created by Akuro-Ou rained down as sparks.

Even if hit by merely one spark, each Raptor was immediately swallowed by exploding fire, burning like a torch while crashing down into Tokyo Bay.

Such a spectacular display of mass extermination. However, only thirty or forty Raptors were taken out. Complete extermination was still far from achieved.

"Haruga-kun, try letting her use the Bow's power this time!"

"Okay, I got it!"

After half a month's absence, the Rune of the Bow was going to be used again to enhance pseudo-divinity to unleash a dragonslaying blast—

Orihime and Hal exchanged nods. However, they heard a voice from behind at this moment.

"Don't worry. I think there's no need to use the rune yet."

"Asya-san!?"

They looked back to see that Asya had arrived behind them.

Hal's childhood friend was dressed in her recent getup consisting of the school uniform with a military jacket on top. Asya swiftly motioned to the side with a glance. Her gaze was directed towards another witch.

A patrol helicopter happened to be landing on the deck.

The rotors continued to spin slowly and had yet to stop completely. Luna Francois Gregory jumped out from the fuselage nimbly.

She landed on the deck with something like a skip.

Noticing the gazes of Hal's group, Luna smiled and waved lightly to them, looking calm and confident.

Paired with that frilly black one-piece dress, she looked like an heiress out on a tour. However, that slender yet mature body of hers, brimming with feminine charm, was conveying her absolutely unshakable confidence as a master mage.

"Orihime-san, please take a good look at how potent the powers of a master-class 'serpent' are when in peak condition rather than on the verge of death. Although she has serious problems in personality and disposition, Luna is blessed with rare gifts as a witch."

"She is Luna-san...?"

Watched by Hal and the others, Luna Francois chanted a song of summoning.

"O stars! Bring forth my magic from the far end of the rainbow!"

A gigantic and ferocious beast gradually materialized on the destroyer's deck.

It was a lion ten-odd meters in length. No less impressive than Akuro-Ou in physique, she also had a beautiful mane. Her fur featured a vivid orange color.

And on the right shoulder—was a green dragon head.

There was even a black goat head on the left shoulder!

In addition, the tail was in the form of a black snake. Its scythe-like neck was raised like a vigorous snake's.

"Is that Glinda... Miss Gregory's 'serpent'!?"

The Trans-Pacific Area's Shootdown Ace, of equal renown as Blue Rushalka who used to be called Europe's strongest.

Hal recalled this rumor. Asya's partner was rare and precious dual-element leviathan possessing pseudo-divinities of Water and Moon. Glinda the "Good Witch of the South" was the same.

Her affinities were Illusion as well as—

"Glinda, exhibit your magic to everyone."

As soon as the order was issued, the three-headed "serpent" instantly cried out with all three mouths.

Ruoooooooooooooooooooooooooooo...

Immediately, a magic circle appeared over the destroyer where Glinda and Hal's group were riding. Illustrated in the center of the magic circle was the evil-exorcising pentagram adorned by complex surrounding patterns forming a circle.

Furthermore, this magic circle was traced out with ominous black light.

Seeing that, Asya instantly issued directions on the destroyer's deck.

"Orihime-san, please tell Akuro-Ou to stand down! It will be dangerous!"

"U-Understood!"

Hal looked up to see that all fighter jets—friendly aircraft—had vanished from the sky.

They had already sought refuge when Akuro-Ou was invoking pseudo-divinity. This was to allow the "serpent" to unleash wide-area attacks without reservation. Furthermore, this was to avoid getting caught in the crossfire.

Similarly, the nine-tailed fox-wolf retreated away from the black magic circle's vicinity—

"Scatter them!"

Luna Francois immediately issued the command.

As a result, the magic circle suddenly expanded. Furthermore, it began to expand spherically, finally turning into a gigantic sphere roughly a kilometer in diameter.

Undoubtedly, at least a hundred Raptors became trapped inside—

"Gravity Control!"

With a vigorous shout from Luna, the black sphere vanished without trace.

What happened next was exceedingly simple. All the Raptors that had been trapped inside the sphere fell into Tokyo Bay. However, the winged lizards' bodies had suffered tragic damage.

Wings, necks, limbs, torsos, spines, tails—

Various parts of their bodies had been broken and twisted, forcibly compressed, even flattened.

This was the damage caused by Glinda's pseudo-divinity of Gravity.

The lion leviathan had applied supergravity to crush these dragons to death!

"Gravity manipulation... I had heard rumors, but this is totally absurd."

"Rushalka and I follow the creed of elegance in battle, but Luna and Glinda rely on brute force. Yet she's always defaming me, calling me a savage or whatever..."

"Haruga-kun, there are lingering stragglers. Let us move out!"

Although Hal was hesitating whether or not to launch a witty retort against Asya's mutterings...

Since Orihime had invited him, Hal decided to forget about making witty comebacks. There were roughly forty or fifty Raptors remaining in the air. The elite dragon controlling them should be hiding somewhere.

To try using the Bow to snipe the hidden dragon huh?

While calculating in his mind, Hal decided to summon his magic gun first.

(Right now... Refrain from making a move.)

"Huh?"

Suddenly hearing a whisper, Hal interrupted what he was doing.

It was a thought transmitted from Hinokagutsuchi. Why did she raise this kind of warning? While Hal was feeling doubt, an unexpected phenomenon occurred. The Rune of the Bow appeared on his right palm.

Hal instinctively knew the dragonslaying bow was trying to tell him something.

The weapon paired with it was nearby—Unmistakably.

(Feel free to continue if you have tired of the mundane world and wish to commit suicide. Do not summon your "wand" to provoke her pointlessly. That girl is a hundred times more belligerent than you...)

Listening to Hinokagutsuchi's voice, Hal looked up at the sky again.

It was here. Golden radiance was descending from the far end of the sky. Although only a small dot was visible in the beginning, it was gradually becoming bigger.

"W-What is that...?"

Orihime's whispered murmur was probably a question weighing on the minds of everyone present.

The sky was quite clear today. The golden radiance—no, a terrifying gigantic creature—swept away the few clouds in the blue sky, descending upon Tokyo Bay like a meteor.

More bluntly stated, it was a super enormous turtle a hundred meters long. Furthermore, the giant turtle's massive body was enveloped in golden light. This surreal creature was descending to Tokyo Bay.

Only mere minutes had elapsed since he had noticed the light. It was falling rather fast.

However, as it neared the sea surface, the gigantic golden chelonian creature decelerated with astounding smoothness. Then quietly, it landed on Tokyo Bay's surface.

Despite its super large body, it was equipped with amazingly agile aerial mobility.

"I-Is that a dragon too!?"

"It's possible. There have been past reports pointing out examples of elite dragons using magic to transform themselves into bizarre forms. However—"

"However, that size and magical strength would be a bit too extraordinary..."

Asya replied to the inexperienced Orihime. Arriving by their side without anyone noticing, Luna Francois also interjected. The two master-class witches exchanged glances.

"Has a dragon king of legend arrived?"

"Red Hannibal, the Black Lightning Emperor... That term refers to the world's strongest dragons like them."

"Your guess is probably half wrong."

Hal's quiet comment made the three witches jump in fright.

At this moment, the golden brightness had vanished. In other words, the light surrounding the bizarre chelonian creature hovering in the air. Right now, the massive body's surface and shell looked greenish black.

Surprisingly, the giant black turtle landed on the water surface near the destroyer.

They were only ten meters apart. Observed from close range, the giant turtle's visage exhibited sacred dignity befitting a humongous monster.

In addition, a black-haired girl was standing on the giant turtle's wide forehead.

She was dressed in a white one-piece dress with her arms crossed in confidence, standing sternly upright with her feet apart. Her appearance was as adorable as a snow fairy with a sense of serene beauty.

However, Hal pointed at the beautiful maiden and warned his companions.

"According to what my rune and wand are telling me, the dragon king seems to be there—It's that girl."

The surviving Raptors howled shrilly in the air.

Terrified by the arrival of a sovereign standing at the pinnacle of their race, they were flying aimlessly all over the place in disarray.

"That insanely huge turtle is her minion... It's just a flunkie..."



Part 3

"You're saying that's a dragon king—But she looks human in appearance!?"

As though speaking on everyone's behalf, Asya yelled out the biggest question.

But before Hal could prepare an answer, the girl standing on her minion's forehead took action. She shot a stern gaze at the noisy Raptors in the sky.

"These winged lizards are making such a racket..."

The young beauty parted his lips lightly and remarked quietly in displeasure. Then she shouted acutely.

"I have no idea who your owner is, but get lost. Disappear from Yukikaze's sight!"

The girl's intimidating effect was very shocking.

With one shout from her, the dozens of Raptors flew away, scattering like monkeys from a fallen tree, escaping as fast as they could in different directions.

"...Asya, did you feel that? All she did was give a shout—"

"...Yeah. The magical power controlling the Raptors has vanished completely."

Witnessing the scene, Asya and Luna Francois whispered quietly in each other's ear.

They no longer brought up any comments that could be construed as doubting the title of the dragon king. As expected of master magi, without relying on theory, they were able to clearly discern the absurdity of the girl called Yukikaze.

At the same time, Orihime murmured in shock.

"Eh, Haruga-kun, that girl... Doesn't she resemble Kagutsuchi-san a little?"

"Yeah, rather than appearance, it's the impression she gives off. After all, they're both queens..."

Recalling his dream of the battle between red and white dragon kings, Hal replied.

In his dream, the white dragon was called "Princess Yukikaze." And right now, the black-haired beauty standing there had also invoked the name of Yukikaze. Both presumably referred to the same being, although they did not resemble each other in face or figure at all—

Meanwhile, Princess Yukikaze looked at the sky, cleared of Raptors, nodding in satisfaction.

Her face seemed to read "scared ya, right?", making this dragon king of a girl seem especially childish. This was completely the opposite of Hinokagutsuchi who looked like a young girl but did not act like a child at all.

"Very well, it's the owner's turn next."

Princess Yukikaze shot a glance at Tokyo Bay's sea surface.

"I won't repeat myself. Come out if you intend to kneel and prostrate yourself before me."

'Since Your Highness has commanded as one of the Gildar, I am in no position to refuse.' fuse.' fuse.'

Emerging from the sea was a monster with a strange voice and appearance.

It definitely had the size and figure of an elite dragon's, but there was nothing more than bones. No skin, no flesh, no dragon scales either. It was merely a dragon skeleton.

And the voice coming from his mouth seemed like it was echoing from the depths of the earth.

'The winged lizards earlier were undoubtedly this old man's minions. Regarding their transgressions, I offer Your Highness my deepest apologies.' gies.' gies.'

This old man—Hal realized the meaning of these words.

The majority of the body had decayed, leaving only white bones. But even so, this old dragon must have lived for a long time.

Furthermore, Hal discovered that parts of the body were not made of white bones.

Namely, the wings on the back. The only part made of steel, a pair of steel wings.

(Perhaps some kind of magic was used to extend life. The strangeness of that voice is probably a side effect of the magic.)

(Is it possible to use Necromancy magic to reanimate a long dead dragon? I shall bet 100 USD on this possibility.)

(As expected of you, Luna, a lowly and vulgar idea.)

(B-But it's just bones. Indeed, it's very similar to zombies rising out of coffins...)

Looking horrified, Orihime joined in the conversation between the two master-class witches.

During this time, Princess Yukikaze announced sonorously.

"Elder, Yukikaze shall proceed to annex these islands—the country of Japan. If you happen to share the same objective, please make your choice between dying or escaping."

'In that case, I choose a third option—subservience under you.' you.' you.'

"Oh? Do you mean to become my lapdog?"

'Precisely. The prey we seek exists only in this land.' land.' land.'

Confronted with Princess Yukikaze who had nonchalantly declared her intention to invade Japan, the old dragon skeleton expressed his wish to serve under her.

Hence, the princess snorted "hmph" in mockery and murmured haughtily.

"The silver dragon who inherited the sword rune? He is apparently hiding in that city."

'You are most correct.' rect.' rect.'

The silver dragon who inherited the sword. Hal, Orihime and Asya exchanged glances.

That meant Pavel Galad. Was he still alive!?

'Although he seems to have barely survived, this Tyrannos is most likely in no state to move around freely. He would become weak and powerless as soon as he transferred to land where miasma is low in concentration, rendered so destitute that even the crudest of magic will be beyond him—' '

"Well, I suppose you might be correct."

Listening to the princess express agreement haughtily. Hal remembered.

Hinokagutsuchi had said something about this before. The Old Tokyo Concession's Monolith was gradually maturing, causing magical power in its vicinity to activate smoothly—

And right now, Galad was so weak that he had no choice but to remain in such a land.

"He did survive a massive explosion after all..."

Ignoring Hal, who was muttering to himself, the old dragon that was all bones proceeded to plead.

'Using some unknown means, he is hiding on the ground like a rat. The winged lizards and I are willing to take on the task of rat hunting on your behalf, Your Highness.' ness.' ness.'

"Yes, I do feel that it would be quite a chore."

Princess Yukikaze chuckled and smiled with a fifteen-year-old beauty's face. However, that smile would be better described as beautiful rather than adorable, belonging more to a warrior than a young girl. At this moment, Hal jumped in surprise.

The princess who had confidently faced off with royal dignity against the old dragon—

For that instant, he could see her figure superimposed with the solemn and awe-inspiring appearance of the white dragon king.

"Very well, I approve your offer. You will complete your mission as my army's vanguard."

'Your consent is much appreciated. I, Ra Exhos, shall fulfill my duty.' ty.' ty.'

"So, Elder Exhos, once you have successfully taken care of the sword's successor—Do you intend to become the new wielder of the sword?"

The princess laughed mischievously while testing him. The old dragon immediately answered.

'Well, it is said that transplanting the power of dragonbane is very difficult... But if that were to proceed smoothly—It might not be a bad development.' ment.' ment.'

"Oh?"

'If that time should come to pass, please permit my act of betrayal.' yal.' yal.'

"Ha! Excellent, I permit it. Do your best to become the next Tyrannos. It would be a different kind of fun to crush this skinny body of yours that only has bones remaining!"

After listening to the old dragon, Exhos, request politely for permission to rebel, the princess agreed with laughter.

This dialogue between non-humans were truly exemplary of a warrior race's culture. Just as Hal was frowning at this conversation that he could not empathize with at all, Princess Yukikaze looked up without warning.

"Next... Thank you for waiting, humans."

Princess Yukikaze puffed out her flat chest proudly and slowly swept her gaze across her surroundings in a circle.

What entered her view was probably the assortment of military forces gathered on this sea on the human side.

Closest to her was the ship carrying Hal's group. In addition, there were almost twenty escort vessels and roughly ten squadrons of fighter jets from bases at Kisarazu, Yokota, Iou Island and others. Then there were the "serpents," Akuro-Ou and Glinda the Good Witch of the South—

"Dragon king, Princess Yukikaze, will speak to you directly. Listen carefully."

Despite her solemn tone as a dragon king, her voice was definitely not loud. But even though that was clearly the case, her magically infused voice easily reached the ears of Hal and the others. Assuredly, it also reached the interior of the ships and fighter jets.

Because her intended audience consisted of all the humans gathered upon this sea.

"The country of Japan where you reside... The nation of the eastern sun shall become Yukikaze's territory before long. Comprehend my intent without fail and convey it clearly to the rest of the people."

Pavel Galad had made a similar declaration last time. However, the princess' decree was even more casual and open—In other words, it was filled with confidence.

Unmistakably. She was quite used to this sort of thing.

"First of all, I shall take over the area of the city around the towering black wedge."

Black wedge. That was probably a reference to the Monolith standing in the Old Tokyo Concession.

Hinokagutsuchi had also called it a 'wedge.' Hal remembered.

"I might arbitrarily order things differently, but please indulge me on this aspect. Because I, Princess Yukikaze, easily change my mind. Besides, the great general capable of accomplishing this feat of conquest is unquestionably me. And just now, I already decided to send that elder to that land as my vanguard."

The princess casually announced as though she had already conquered Japan.

Her beautiful face, brimming with confidence, was not only filled with ambition but also conveyed a vague hint of childishness. Hal believed it was part of her unique charm.

"Also, I must inform you all. My direct vassal, Genbu-Ou, will be standing by here."

GOAHAAAAAAAAAAAAAYH...

Carrying Princess Yukikaze on its forehead, the gigantic chelonian creature gave a low growl. Although the sound was not fervent enough to call roar, it spread far and wide like the rumbling of the ground.

This giant black turtle, a hundred meters long, was precisely "Genbu-Ou."

"Thus concludes Yukikaze's declaration. Should there be any objections, express them directly with a show of force instead of wasting words. Feeble rebellions have no value to speak of, this is a dragon king's way of conducting business. Even I, Yukikaze, am no exception!"

Having finished what she wanted to say, Princess Yukikaze suddenly swung her right arm.

As a result, a streamlined white board flew over from the far end of the sky with speed too fast to capture with the eye. This object greatly resembled the surfboards of the human realm.

The princess took a mighty leap and jumped off the forehead of the Genbu-Ou the giant turtle.

Then before she fell straight into the sea, she landed safely on the incoming surfboard-like object.

The instant he saw that streamlined white object, the Rune of the Bow in Hal's right palm heated up. The magic gun residing inside told him it was also a magic wand.

In addition, that unidentified flying object was also part of the "dragonslaying arrow."

"See you later. Do not forget the name of Yukikaze. It is the name of the lord you will all eventually serve!"

Riding the streamlined white object, Princess Yukikaze asserted loudly and flew away.

She was rising straight as though aiming for the far end of the clouds. However, just before the princess disappeared from sight, Hal experienced bone-chilling terror.

This was because for one brief instant, he felt as though Princess Yukikaze had glanced at him.

Before he could shake off that sense of terror, someone spoke up.

'Next it is my turn to speak. The region the White Princess expressed her wish to occupy is the city you call "Tokyo," is that correct?' rect?' rect?'

Despite being a member of dragonkind, the old dragon, Ra Exhos, had used a Japanese geographic name.

Princess Yukikaze had done the same. Among dragonkind, there existed dragons who were well-versed in the state of affairs on the human side.

'In order to hunt down my compatriot hiding in that place—namely, the holder of the Rune of the Sword, I shall swiftly occupy "Tokyo." It is my wish that you remain silent and cooperate obediently with non-resistance. This is fait accompli.' pli.' pli.'

The old dragon even proceeded to make such a demand.

While Hal and the others were confronting the "dragon king faction" offshore of Haneda...

Shirasaka Hazumi was present at Shin-Kiba's region of reclaimed land. Her purpose there was interception and defense.

Considering the scale of the enemy invasion as well as the battle's location offshore of Haneda, the Raptors were guaranteed to show up here, trying to break through.

In order to strike them down at the water's edge as much as possible, she was on standby at the reclaimed land by the sea.

For the same reason, the ground, maritime and air forces of the SDF had mobilized with urgency from various bases of the Kantou region—Kisarazu, Matsudo, Narashino, Oomiya, Asaka, Nerima, Shinakawa, Yokosuka, Yokota, etc to form a defensive line. However, Hazumi's partner still stood out in terms of combat power.

Naturally, Hazumi and Minadzuki were obliged to take center stage.

"But in terms of operation, this is as simple as 'an easy job of pushing a button.' Feel free to relax, okay?"

"I-I don't think I can do that..."

Receiving her at the scene, Kenjou Genya spoke nonsense, putting Hazumi in fluster.

This joke in poor taste was typical of SAURU staff.

In any case, surrounded by Kenjou and tactical units sent by the Metropolitan Police Department as support, Hazumi summoned the reborn Minadzuki from a pier with excellent visibility.

Then news of the dragons' arrival finally reached them.

Straight away, she clumsily invoked Enemy Detection and Spatial Perception, which were magic spells for locating enemies afar and obtaining a top-down view of the situation like a map. Then she sent Minadzuki to places where Raptors were already invading, engaging in remote-controlled battles with single-minded focus.

Whether Hazumi or the reborn Minadzuki, neither were the same as before. No longer having trouble, even when fighting multiple Raptors, they kept winning in place after place.

Just as Kenjou had said, these battles were definitely quite "easy."

Rather, it was the use of magic that proved more taxing. Once the fighting came to a close, Hazumi was already about to collapse from exhaustion.

This was the price paid for having Minadzuki fight successively in coastal areas of Tokyo New Town, Kanagawa and Chiba.

Still, she was not drained to the point of needing an intravenous drip. Although this was one area she had shown growth compared to before—Hazumi lay down weakly, not making a sound.

Kenjou borrowed a patrol car from the MPD then put down the front passenger seat for her to lie down.

"If I could do even better, it would decrease the damage slightly..."

Wherever she had sent Minadzuki, she would witness devastated urban areas.

Damage was unavoidable once Raptors invaded. This could not be helped.

Besides, even if that rune had been at her disposal, today's outcome probably would not change. The reason why long-distance combat drained her so much was because her strength as a witch was insufficient...

Hazumi was well aware that this could not be helped. But even so—

The moment she sighed, Hazumi suddenly felt a leviathan's protection deployed in her surroundings. This was magic for repelling evil.

"W-What's wrong? Minadzuki..."

Her "serpent" partner seemed to be worrying about her. Hazumi jumped in surprise.

The same had happened before when an elite dragon attacked. Was it happening again? Forcing her feeble body to move, she desperately got up and left the police car.

"E-Everyone! Please be careful, the dragons are planning to launch wide-scale magic! Minadzuki, don't focus on me alone, you have to protect everyone—!"

Gathered at the reclaimed land of Shin-Kiba were people including the MPD's tactical units and Kenjou.

Wanting to protect them, Hazumi tried as hard as she could to summon her partner who had dematerialized.

However, her entire body was limp and could not exert any strength. She was showing signs similar to anemia. Suffering from such a severe case of exhaustion, it was impossible to materialize her "serpent."

Massive magical power was surging forth from the sea—the other side of Tokyo Bay!

Feeling this presence, Hazumi began to shiver all over.

Meanwhile offshore of Haneda—

'O runes of Ruruk Soun! Lend me the power to accomplish the mystic rite!'

The old dragon, Exhos, spread his steel wings and flew into the air.

His skull's gaze was directed towards Tokyo. In addition, almost thirty runes of Ruruk Soun had manifested as though to encircle his body.

Was he planning to cast some kind of big spell on Tokyo—!?

"Glinda, stop him from casting!"

As Luna Francois gave the order, Glinda kicked off forcefully from the escort ship's deck.

Despite possessing heads of a dragon and a goat, she jumped with feline agility like a lion. Then she started to fly towards Exhos in the air, accelerating all at once.

"We'll move out too! Please, Juujouji, hurry and call Akuro-Ou!"

"Yes! Leave it to me, Haruga-kun!"

Hal swiftly summoned his magic gun while calling to his companion.

Orihime responded immediately in return, ordering Akuro-Ou, who was on standby in the air afar, to fly in pursuit of Glinda. They intended to use the Rune of the Bow to blast the old dragon.

But at this moment, the escort ship began to shake violently.

This was because the nearby giant turtle minion, Genbu-Ou, had crashed over lightly.

"Kyah!?"

Orihime screamed loudly and fell over.

Hal, Asya, Luna Francois and all member of the crew on deck were met with the same fate. Even the helicopter fuselages were shaking intensely.

Using its body to collide, Genbu-Ou was a hundred meters in length.

The ship carrying Hal and company was two hundred meters long. In terms of size, the ship held an overwhelming upper hand.

However, there was no way for a ship to wrestle with this kind of giant monster. Although the gatling cannons on the ship's aft were already firing continuously, Genbu-Ou remained unshaken regardless how much gunfire it was under.

Furthermore, the giant turtle was emitting terrifying growls from its mouth.

GOAHAAAAAAAAAAAAATH !

Immediately, four runes of Ruruk Soun, signifying "shield," suddenly appeared in the air, blocking Glinda and Akuro-Ou's path in flight.

The two "serpents" collided violently with these runes and were immediately deflected, crashing towards the sea.

"I can't believe this guy can even use the runes of Ruruk Soun!"

Despite his surprise Hal still raised his magic gun and fired in triple-burst mode. Three consecutive shots. However, the moment the bullets struck, Genbu-Ou's entire body shone with golden luster, giving off sacred light.

Hence, the three dragonslaying bullets were all deflected by the light.

"Don't tell me this is the Arrow's power of dragonbane!?"

At this moment, the old dragon in the air completed his mysterious ritual of Ruruk Soun.

The almost thirty runes summoned by Exhos flew inland with astounding speed. This was Shinonome and Ariake—the direction of Tokyo New Town and the Old Tokyo Concession.

Then in the following instant...

From the sea surface in the distance, Hal and company witnessed an unprecedented scene.

Thick white mist shrouded New and Old Tokyo with horrifying speed, covering the entire land within the blink of an eye—

Part 4

Her full name was Mutou Natsumi.

Haruga Haruomi aka Hal called her "Mutou-san." She was Hal's classmate and fellow club member. Another classmate, addressed similarly as "Funaki-san," had a full name of Funaki Kyouka, actually.

What these two girls shared in common was their school, year level and homeroom.

In fact, they also lived near each other. Both of them were residents of Gasai in the Edogawa Ward.

However, their homes were separated by a fair distance. Even so, the two of them would often run into each other at the station or on the streets. Like this chance encounter while all residents were heading to the local designated shelter or some such would be very likely to happen.

"Dear me, isn't this Funaki-san? What a coincidence."

"Oh my, this must be what they call destined neighbors."

The short-haired girl with the outgoing personality, Mutou-san, greeted "Hi," prompting the twintailed girl who always greeted everyone cheerfully, Funaki-san, to respond with a smile.

This encounter was taking place in an elementary school's gym that served as the local designated shelter.

Serendipitously finding an acquaintance nearby due to a crowd of over a thousand gathered in one place, this was probably thanks to luck and living in the same area. Contributing factors probably included the fact that it was after 6pm when it would not be unusual for students to have returned home, right?

"The dragons are probably nearing Kantou by now, right?"

Despite being in the middle of an evacuation, Funaki-san spoke with an extraordinarily laid back air.

The Kantou region had been protected by the "emerald serpent" for many years. There were also many SDF bases nearby. Even if lesser dragons attacked, it had been a long while since the last time it evolved into a major tragedy. Consequently, the residents were not very tense.

But as an informed member of the UFO Research Club, Mutou-san shook her head.

"Hmm... Since they issued an evacuation order like this, I'm thinking that Tokyo Bay has already been breached. Rather than nearing Kantou, it's probably better to say that they're nearing Tokyo."

"Uh, how near is this 'near' you're talking about!?"

"I fear they might have reached Shin-Kiba or the Ariake area."

However, Mutou-san was not god.

She did not know that the dragons had not only breached Tokyo Bay but also reached the interior of New Town. Instead, she was just joking around to scare her classmate. Probably due to suddenly getting scared, Funaki-san's eyes began to well up with tears.

At this moment, a stretcher was lifted into the gym, startling the two girls.

"M-Mutou-san, he's so handsome! That guy is so handsome!"

"Uh, that's what surprised you? But yeah, that's definitely surprising too."

Funaki-san pointed at the young man lying on the stretcher.

A handsome silver-haired man. The deep-set features and pale complexion of his face were clearly not Japanese. Furthermore, his build was tall and slim.

It was unknown whether he was injured or not, but a pained expression surfaced on his face. His consciousness also seemed hazy.

Carrying the stretcher were not paramedics but two ordinary men. They were tirelessly speaking to people nearby, looking quite helpless.

—I heard that Gasai has been attacked by dragons. Yeah, this guy apparently got hurt there and so was sent here for treatment. Can someone have a look at him—?

After listening to the situation, nearby adults all gathered around a middle-aged man.

Mutou-san originally wanted to follow the crowd but gave up because there were too many people. Instead, she approached the stretcher that was placed on the gym's floor.

Funaki-san had already gone over there. Worriedly, she stared at the handsome silver-haired man.

"I-Is he hurting somewhere? But at a glance, I don't see any bleeding..."

"Well, it could be a fracture, internal damage, concussion or a pre-existing disease. Hmm, then all we can do is ask around to see if there's a doctor—"

The classmate was right, the young man definitely showed no external injuries.

Although Mutou-san herself was quite flustered herself, she still tried to handle the urgent situation. However, she noticed the young man was muttering something.

"Urgh... Although I know not where you came from, Zizou—Don't expect things to go your way...!"

After listening to this bizarre statement, Mutou-san went "eh?" in puzzlement.

At this moment, the young man pressed his right palm over his heart, causing a "bzzzt!" sound to emit from his body. Next to him, Mutou-san and Funaki-san trembled slightly, feeling as though their entire body had been electrified.

"W-Was that static electricity just now...?"

Just as Funaki-san cocked her head in doubt, a bizarre phenomenon happened, far beyond the realm of mysterious static electricity.

People around them suddenly collapsed one after another. And not just a few or a couple dozen. All the people in the gym, hundreds of them—

"W-What's with everyone...?"

The sudden calamity caused Mutou-san to jump in surprise from the bottom of her heart.

But even so, she still approached the nearest old man and pressed her hand against his neck.

"So cold!?"

Mutou-san could not help but feel shocked because the old man's skin felt icy cold.

She hastily checked the pulse on his wrist and brought her ear against his lips—Only then did she breathe a sigh of relief. Although it was frighteningly weak, the pulse was beating at least. There was also slight breathing.

"B-But at this rate, it's still bad. Are you okay!?"

Mutou-san tried to shake the old man by the shoulders. He did not wake up.

She also tried to pat his cheeks lightly. Still did not wake up. She then tried to shake him even harder. The man showed no signs of waking up at all.

With inexplicable unease surging in her heart, Mutou-san slowly looked around her in the gym.

Not everyone had fainted. Funaki-san was fine. Although the handsome young man was still tormented by unknown pain, his eyes still glinted with the light of consciousness.

There were six or seven more people like Mutou-san who were surprised by the sudden calamity—

Apart from that, everyone else had collapsed. Mutou-san's family, who had come to take shelter with her, had all fallen unconscious. Out of roughly a thousand people, to think that no more than ten remained fine...

"I-I will look outside!"

"Mutou-san!?"

Ignoring Funaki-san's call, Mutou-san ran out of the gym without looking back.

It was already night outside. Furthermore, white mist was hanging in the air. The mist was frighteningly dense, limiting visibility beyond five meters.

However, she stared intently amidst this vision-obscuring mist.

The hundreds of people over on the sports ground had all collapsed, rendered unconscious.

Mutou-san tried to wake several of them, but the result was the same as before. No one woke up.

"What on earth is going on...?"

Although well-informed, Mutou-san was not an expert in handling dragons.

Shocked and helpless, there was no way for her to reach the conclusion that "an elite's high-level magic" was responsible.

"Senpai, Nee-sama, Asya-san! Are you all okay!?"

"Although it's not quite correct to say we almost lost our lives, we survived at least..."

"Seeing you in good health too, Hazumi, I can finally stop worrying."

After meeting up with the unharmed Hazumi, Hal and Orihime remarked respectively.

Getting off the large escort ship that had arrived at the Shin-Kiba pier, the group immediately made their way to the reclaimed land.

Whether the harbor or this place, thick white mist was hanging everywhere. Dozens of policemen in tactical unit uniforms were collapsed on the ground in deep slumber.

"Because Minadzuki protected me... But Kenjou-san and the police—"

Hazumi tearfully reported to her cousin.

"I failed to protect everyone properly..."

"This can't be helped. Even if Luna and I were here, we probably wouldn't have been able to do anything."

Asya patted her junior on the shoulder to comfort her.

The runes of Ruruk Soun released by the old dragon, Exhos, had summoned thick white mist.

Almost all humans within range of the dense mist would fall into an unconscious state.

The MPD tactical teams and Kenjou stationed here to support Hazumi and Minadzuki had mostly fallen victim, rendered unconscious. Currently, the ones giving them aid were members of the JMSDF and JASDF who had entered port together with Hal's group.

Shin-Kiba's reclaimed land suddenly became noisy.

Meanwhile, Luna Francois said with a laid back expression, "It seems that the area swallowed by this dense mist is almost fully investigated."

She announced while confirming on her cellphone. Telephone lines were still operating normally, hence it was possible to contact the outside world and aggregate information.

In particular, as the Shootdown Ace, Luna had no ordinary relationship with the TPDO.

Added to that was her position as a cadre of SAURU. She ought to have powerful information gathering abilities at her disposal.

"From what I hear, it practically covers the entire Old Tokyo Concession, all of Tokyo New Town except for the all areas north of the Arakawa in the Adachi Ward, as well as parts of Ichikawa City and Urayasu City in Chiba Prefecture. Since I am not familiar with the geographic layout here, I don't know the scope of the white mist's effects at all."

"Oh my, in other words, it's quite far reaching."

"In addition, the majority of humans under its effects are 'frozen.'"

"Frozen, you say?"

"Yes. Complete loss of consciousness, extremely weak vital signs, a state of suspended animation akin to cold sleep. That is why I used the word frozen. By the way, not just humans but even cats, dogs, birds, cattle, horses, reptiles and fish have ostensibly fallen victim too."

"I see. Magic to force living organisms into suspended animation huh..."

"But it seems that a number of people were fortunately spared—They were not attacked by the magic."

"Isn't Tokyo New Town's population roughly seven hundred thousand?"

After listening to the information provided by Luna Francois, Asya murmured.

Tokyo's population had decreased substantially from over ten million in the past.

"I suppose it is because the magic is cast over an extremely wide area upon nonspecific targets? This follows the same principle as how there are always people who escape infection no matter how virulent a disease."

"T-Then how many people are unaffected!?"

"The precise number is obviously unknown but from what I hear, it doesn't seem to exceed 20%."

After replying readily to Hazumi, whose face was filled with worry, Luna continued.

"We will be of little help even if we were to stay here. Why not head over to where information is pooled? Oh dear? What is that place called, Harry? This city's police headquarters."

"Are you perhaps referring to the MPD at Kanegafuchi?"

"Yes, that one. True to the name of Harry, your reply truly hit the spot."

Incidentally, the vicinity of Kanegafuchi had been redeveloped into modernized commercial and office zones.

This district, rich in the trappings of *Shitamachi*, the low-lying and traditional part of Tokyo, from the previous century was no more, transformed into an urban space similar to Shinjuku Fukutoshin in the past.

Hal shrugged and asked Luna Francois.

"Let me ask about something else. Is that totally sudden nickname actually referring to me?"

"Of course. Haruga Haruomi shortens to Harry. Don't you like it?"

"As long as it doesn't pop up without warning like just now. By the way, that nickname reminds me of a certain wizard who rose to prominence thanks to the clout of a father with strong asshole tendencies. That feels a bit annoying."

"Ah yes, Mr. Potter's son is a bit garbage, isn't he? But please rest assured."
Luna smiled tenderly.

"The Harry I am picturing is the dirty one."

"Although that guy isn't garbage, he's a sorry excuse of a human being with serious behavioral issues, right?"

"Who cares? I didn't have an easy time coming up with that one."

"As expected of you, Luna. How frivolous can you get? I can't believe you're still cracking these jokes in this emergency situation..."

"However, Asya, I saw it. Fifteen minutes prior, you were hiding away, wolfing down seven cans of beef stroganoff taken from military rations."

"W-When did you uncover a maiden's secret—!?"

"Fufufufu. Know that walls have ears♪"

"Umm, I understand that despite acting like this, all of you are actually thinking seriously about many matters—Because I believe that, I don't mind at all."

After listening to the conversation between Hal and the senior witches, Orihime sighed lightly.

At the same time, she hugged Hazumi who clearly had no idea how to react towards her elders' frivolous behavior.

"But I do hope you could stop saying things in front of Hazumi that could be a bad influence..."

"Don't worry. The current situation could be considered fortunate, actually, almost enough to hold a celebration party. After all, in a situation where an elite has cast high-level magic, the victims are merely sleeping as result. Instantly massacring all residents would be the worst-case scenario."

This comment, extreme yet to the point, was very much in the style of a master-class witch with serious personality flaws.

However, Luna Francois spoke softly with a pensive expression.

"The elite probably wanted to enchant the entire area of New Town and Old Tokyo, hence the level of the magic had to be decreased. Thus what resulted was not a death curse but something half-baked like cold sleep."

As one would expect, Luna Francois was evidently a very capable person.

No wonder Hal's childhood friend called her a "villain." In that case, communicating with her was easy. Hal spoke up.

"Can I make a request? I think the next course of action is to start assessing the damage or deploy rescue operations—But my hope is that first priority is given to searching and protecting Juujouji and Shirasaka's family."

"Understood. Leave it to me."

Luna replied very readily without even asking for reasons.

Listening to the above conversation, Hazumi panicked instead.

"N-No, we can't be the only ones to receive preferential treatment."

"You are so honest. But don't worry, this level of privilege is nothing special."

"Fair... enough. We will accept their kind gesture, Hazumi."

"N-Nee-sama!?"

"We are not like Asya-san and Luna-san, capable of staying calm at all times. Since worrying about family will divert our attention, we should make use of privilege to eliminate uncertain factors."

Concern for family versus sense of public duty. Justice versus responsibility.

Orihime weighed all of this then declared firmly. To think that she could display such open-minded mental strength, sure enough, she was no ordinary character.

Seeing his companion was so reliable, even Hal nodded at Hazumi himself.

The law-abiding junior fell silent, lost in thought. Finally, she nodded vigorously in agreement.

"Hazumi-san, as witches risking your lives, this sort of trivial thing is part and parcel of your rightful privileges. No need to let this weigh on your mind. By the way, there is something slightly problematic about what Orihime-san said just now..."

"Eh? Did I say something wrong?"

Confronted with her puzzled junior witch, Asya began to complain.

"Basically, lumping me together with Luna. Compared to Luna's villainous heart and evil, even the four devas of Buddhism become insignificant characters, let alone someone like me? I am just a frail and gentle girl. That's why—"

"U-Umm, Haruga-kun, what do you think...?"

"Don't ask for my opinion. Go ahead and speak your mind."

"I-In that case, I still think that my impressions of Asya-san and Luna-san are locked in close race."

"Haruomi! Please stop giving advice that could fracture friendship between girls!"

Just as they were chatting intensely, Hazumi suddenly pointed at the sky.

"E-Everyone look—!"

A blue Raptor was soaring through heavy mist in the night sky.

Raptors were normally the color of steel. However, the surface of this Raptor's body was coated with quite a striking color, resembling a brilliant sapphire.

After observing the ground's situation with its head down, the blue Raptor flew away.

"In other words, Tokyo has been occupied by the dragons..."

Hal recalled the final scene that had taken place at sea.

This had happened not long after white mist appeared at New and Old Tokyo—

'Confirm with your own eyes what mysterious phenomena the mist will cause. What I wish to tell your ape-like race is actually very simple.' ple.' ple.'

The old dragon, Exhos, had returned to the side of the escort ship carrying Hal and the others.

Hovering motionlessly in the air with his steel wings spread out, he said, 'No one may leave this "Tokyo" that is sealed by the mist. If you abide by this rule, I will respond with appropriate action.' tion.' tion.'

Exhos' head was a dragon skull.

Where eyeballs originally resided, there were the depressions of eye sockets, merely empty caves remaining. However, the two eye sockets were directed at the escort ship's deck—Haruga Haruomi with magic gun in hand.

'Because it seems there are others to be wary of apart from the Tyrannos of the Sword! I will neither belittle nor underestimate the authority of dragonslaying power. Allow me to uphold the rightful level of respect.' pect.' pect.'

At this moment, the old dragon, who had turned into white bones, began to snicker as though the situation was unfolding satisfactorily.

'Fufu. Naturally, I could also choose to dispose of you lot first—'

GOAHAAAAAAAAAAAAATH.

Genbu-Ou suddenly growled at this moment as though warning its compatriot. As a result, the old dragon, Exhos, suddenly switched to a solemn tone of voice.

'I understand, vassal of black. Let the jokes cease here. Well then, goodbye for now.' now.' now.'

After saying that, Exhos invoked Teleportation magic to disappear suddenly.

Then Genbu-Ou vanished together.

However, the whole time before vanishing, the gigantic and imposing turtle's eyes were watching the movements of Hal's magic gun intently as though keeping him under scrutiny. This too was the undeniable truth—

Part 5

The next morning after the battle, offshore of Haneda and Tokyo was shrouded under a mist of suspended animation...

At roughly 9am, Hal drove a passenger car to the area of Adachi Ward and downtown Kitasenju. Asya was sitting in the front passenger seat while Luna Francois was also seated in the back.

"After one night, the mist has dispersed quite a bit."

Just as Luna pointed out, the thick mist hanging over all of Tokyo had thinned out greatly.

Currently, it was just a layer of light mist. Hence, visibility was not compromised and he could drive smoothly. However.

Tokyo New Town's appearance had changed dramatically overnight.

Cars and people had completely vanished off the streets, turning the city into a ghost town. Right now, Hal's passenger car was the only vehicle

driving on the road. (Incidentally, this car belonged to Kenjou Genya. Since the owner was in a coma, Hal had borrowed it without asking.)

"Another Raptor flying over..."

"These are only tentative numbers but currently, visual estimates suggest that there are sixty Raptors circling the skies of New Town."

After Asya looked out to the sky from the passenger seat window and commented, Luna added supplementary information.

Just as Hal's childhood friend pointed out, Hal also saw the blue Raptors flying leisurely in Tokyo New Town's sky at the Adachi Ward.

Taking the place of the vanished people and cars, they had become the masters of the ghost town.

"Until yesterday, this was clearly a human city."

Hal gripped the steering wheel and muttered to himself. At this moment, he noticed something.

Although his car was driving along a national highway, there was a wrecked passenger vehicle abandoned on the side of the road. The vehicle had smashed violently into the guardrail, rendering its front end unrecognizable. No one was in the car.

In any case, the passengers inside the car had probably been rescued last night. Whether they were alive or dead, naturally, was an unknown...

"Looks like they were unfortunate enough to be driving when the mist rose."

"If only they had found shelter earlier..."

For better or worse, this type of accident was rare, probably thanks to the emergency evacuation order issued when the dragons attacked.

"It appears that an interim report has arrived. It says that citizens who remain unfrozen number less than 10%."

"Since local residents are virtually all gathered at shelters, counting them is a very quick job...?"

"Either way, the fact that the taking in and observation of victims can be carried out directly at the shelters means that plenty of labor was saved in rescue efforts. Ironically, this is all thanks to the dragons."

"But the people in charge of this line of work are also down to one tenth as well. Wouldn't the shortage of manpower immediately result in a hopeless situation?"

"Then how about pulling manpower from outside—But that would be impossible."

"After all, now that Tokyo has become the demon city occupied by dragons, attitudes everywhere else have become ambivalent and passive..."

Despite the deluge of headache-inducing news, there were good developments too.

Orihime's grandfather and Hazumi's parents were located last night and delivered to the MPD headquarters at Kanegafuchi. Although they were in a state of suspended animation, at least they would remain safe and sound no matter what.

The two witches of New Town were currently by their family's side.

Hence, only the SAURU trio headed out to scout this time.

"By the way, Luna, have you contacted Hiiragi-san who is at Yokohama?"

"Yes, so let her work to her heart's content outside on our behalf!"

Having arrived near the Arakawa, Hal drove the car onto the river bank.

The trio alighted the vehicle and climbed up the Arakawa's embankment. This wide shore area was home to many sports arenas and cycling roads.

On their way here, Hal's group had driven along the south side of the Arakawa, in other words, what was known as the right bank.

By crossing this river, one would escape the "freeze" effect's scope.

However, the major bridge located dozens of meters away, New Senjuu Bridge, had been destroyed. Although it looked like it had been bombed, Raptors were undoubtedly responsible.

Furthermore, near the river shore where this bridge was situated—

A crushed light truck had sunk in the Arakawa.

"This is probably *that*. Late last night, a truck carrying thirteen people left the shelter at Adachi Ward on their own without permission. Sure enough, they were trying to escape New Town..."

"So in the end, no one may leave Tokyo..."

After Luna Francois explained quietly, Asya quoted what the old dragon, Exhos, had said.

"The residents were clearly warned by public announcement not to act recklessly..."

"But you can't blame them for feeling anxious. After all, those things are flying everywhere."

Hal pointed at the sky.

Two Raptors had flown over here by the time they noticed. Slowly circling in the air to watch the ground—They were most likely watching Hal and company's movements. They were conducting surveillance.

"I heard that something similar happened at Tabata and Kameari last night."

"Regarding the current calamity, the government and the media have announced that 'investigations are currently underway in earnest.' However, the unsubstantiated report of 'Tokyo has been taken over by the dragons!?' already started spreading around early on as a hot rumor."

Luna Francois and Asya checked their cellphones and commented.

Hal also activated magical sight and looked in a certain direction.

Namely, the Old Tokyo Concession—the direction of what was formerly Ginza in the Chūō Ward. The towering triangular prism of pure black, the Monolith standing over a kilometer tall.

It was clearly visible from the wide-open Arakawa shore. Thus Hal stared intently.

Soon, he saw something. Namely, hovering over the Monolith was a rune consisting of three Vs in a series—The Rune of the Sword. Since the rune was gradually fading away, it was impossible to see unless he concentrated.

However, the dragonslaying sword's emblem was surviving, just barely.

"Not noticing it earlier... Was it our oversight?"

"Although you say that, I really want to object and say 'Like anyone would notice that kind of trick!'"

Hal summoned his magic gun. Rather than firing it, he wanted to check the rules of the game that the mysterious man named Sophocles had called the "Road to Kingship."

"...I, Galad and the other dragon kings must engrave one's dragonslaying rune in that manner in order to obtain the right to rule over a particular piece of land. And that right is lost only upon *death*. The stronger the magical power in the land being ruled, the greater the power of dragonbane..."

Hal realized after reciting the words surfacing in his mind.

"I get it now. As long as Galad still lives, that dragon king who's called Yukikaze won't be able to become Tokyo's ruler. That's why she's trying to find and eliminate him."

"But she's already the de facto ruler."

Asya shrugged with a weary look.

"With this many Raptors flying around with impunity, you won't find another city like this in the entire world."

"Although there is the option of using Glinda to take them out one at a time, I'd rather not resort to this solution. I feel that it seems to be some kind of trap. Were our positions reversed, I would definitely do the same."

"As expected of you, Luna. That sounds like the opinion from a famed master of traps."

"Is trap really the right word—?"

After listening to Luna Francois' murmuring, Hal spoke up.

"My gun detected from those things—the blue Raptors—the presence of dragonslaying power. By using that so-called techniques of dragonbane, they're able to confer dragonslaying power to their minions. A while back, the elite called Soth also did it, so more than likely..."

Although Raak Al Soth was not a successor of dragonslaying power, he was able to create an imitation to temporarily bestow his minion Raptors with the authority of dragonbane.

Probably recalling the battle against the bronze dragon, Asya sighed.

"What you mean is... That bones-only elite might be able to emulate dragonslaying power?"

"In that case, it would be best to avoid letting Glinda and Minadzuki engage those blue variants directly. If Harry's report is correct, the leviathans' movements will be sealed."

Just as Luna Francois nodded in agreement...

A blue Raptor immediately flew towards them and descended. However, killing it in a single shot would be an effortless task for the magic gun held in Hal's hand. Just as the group decided to observe the Raptor's movements for now—

'We meet again, Lord Tyrannos.' nos.' nos.'

Descending gracefully, the Raptor spoke with the voice of the old dragon, Exhos.

Hal came to a realization. This was also the magic of dragons. Employing a lesser dragon while taking control of its eyes, ears, nose and mouth to serve one's own purpose—

"Are you looking for Pavel Galad by any chance?"

'How astute of you, Lord Tyrannos. Precisely. If His Highness the Sword Tyrannos could be hypnotized successfully, it would probably take merely a night's duration to locate him.' him.' him.'

The Exhos-Raptor laughed while answering Hal's question.

'He appears to be valiantly holding on by the skin of his teeth, leaving me no recourse but to send out pursuers. Still, a hunt once in a while might not be so bad after all. Hahahaha.' ha.' ha.'

English nobles and hunting dogs shared the pleasures of the hunt. From Exhos' perspective, all this was probably like playing a game.

With a "hmph," Hal dismissed this sadistic hobby, typical of dragons.

'Your Highness the Bow Tyrannos, if you are willing to stand back and watch my hunt, I shall adhere to my earlier promise and respond with appropriate action.' tion.' tion.'

"Appropriate action means taking over this city like a gentleman would?"

'Hahahaha, precisely. I will have the winged lizards refrain from unnecessary destruction and slaughter. However, no one is allowed to leave this city. Those who violate this rule—' rule—' rule—'

The Raptor's eyes turned to the destroyed New Senjuu Bridge.

This meant extermination. Then without waiting for Hal's reply, the Raptor responsible for bearing the message flew away.

"That's why I always say these dragon bastards are..."

Just as Hal cursed dragonkind for their belligerence...

Hal and Asya's cellphones rang at the same time. Had text messages arrived? The two of them took out their phones to check—But were greatly surprised.

"I'm relieved you're fine."

"You took the same words out of our mouths..."

"Likewise, I can't believe you're both okay, President and Mutou-san..."

"It's not just me. Funaki-san from our class is with me at the same shelter and she's fine too."

The location was the cultural clubs building on Kogetsu Academy's premises.

This conversation was taking place between those present in the UFO Research Club's room on the third floor—President M, Asya, Hal and Mutou-san.

'Those who are unaffected, gather at school if possible! President's orders!'

Responding to the president's text, the group had rushed over as fast as they could.

Furthermore, Kogetsu Academy was not designated as a shelter because it was a SAURU facility. These four should be the only people in school right now.

"Among the people we know, there's also Juujouji and her cousin who are both safe and sound too."

"Wow—Wonderful, wonderful. We're actually blessed with amazing luck, right?"

After hearing the news from Hal, Mutou-san clapped her hands happily.

However, the witches were guarded by their "serpents" while Hal had protection from the Rune of the Bow. Mutou-san was probably the only one enjoying amazing luck for real. As for President M, surely she had defeated the freezing curse with her inborn vitality. Probably.

"By the way, is the bike outside yours, Mutou-san?"

"Yeah. After all, the trains aren't running. I had to rush over to Ryougoku here all the way from west Gasai. But since there were no cars driving in the roads, it was a surprisingly easy ride~~"

Asya asked for confirmation, prompting Mutou-san to bring up encouraging exploits.

The hybrid bicycle parked outside the clubs building turned out to be hers after all.

"Well, although this incomprehensible situation is quite tricky, it's good to have companions. What are your plans next?"

"I'm going back to my original shelter first."

Mutou-san was the first to answer President M's question.

"I heard the rescuers from the SDF say that they were going to gather all the unaffected people from each area together to establish a new shelter. I plan on heading over in a bit. What about you, Prez?"

"I am going to—train."

The president suddenly announced. The three ordinary club members went "eh?" at the same time.

"I said train. It appears that Tokyo has fallen to the dragons. I know not whether this is the reason but a voice inside me is quietly telling me 'Now is the precisely the time for new power to awaken.'"

Perhaps President M was receiving a message from something like the cosmic consciousness or Gaia. Normally, such absurd nonsense would only cause spit-takes but coming from her, it sounded unexpectedly convincing. How unbelievable, although it was still totally surreal.

Encouraged by President M's words, Hal could not help but feel an impulse to make a similar declaration.

"I have some usual business—no, sundry chores to handle, so I'll be living at school in the meantime."

"Eh? You're going to live at school?"

"Yeah, all the things I need happen to be here."

Hal nodded at the surprised Asya.

The blue Raptors were circling all over Tokyo New Town with impunity. But perhaps wary of the dragonslaying bow, they had strictly reined in their behavior the whole time.

In that case, there was still a grace period. Hal wanted to use it to do something.

"You look like you have considerations. Very well, you and I shall live here to hold an emergency upgrade camp!"

Ignoring Hal's incredulous childhood friend and Mutou-san, President M declared solemnly.

However, Hal shook his head and apologized, "Sorry, I will be camping next door."

Then he pointed at the library adjacent to the clubs building. It was the structure serving as the temporary Witch Mansion.

Ordinary logic would dictate that he should assist Asya and Luna to focus on retaking Tokyo in this situation.

However, Hal still had unfinished work that had to be handled first.

Chapter 3 - Treasure Hunting and Cohabitation

Part 1

"Huuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu~::~~::~!"

President M pursed her lips and blew vigorously.

Her massive body, a hundred and forty kilograms by estimates, was clad in the Academy's designated tracksuit. The location was the roof of the cultural clubs building.

The declaration of the camp's commencement had taken place yesterday afternoon. Twenty-four hours had elapsed already.

When Asya came to visit while bringing refreshments, President M happened to be doing bizarre exercises that one might doubtfully call gymnastics.

...Because she was twisting her body left and right while simultaneously repeating intense breaths that were far deeper than necessary.

"Is this what they call deep-breathing weight loss?"

"Fool. This is a special breathing technique for drawing out unknown powers dormant inside the body."

Asya's question instantly prompted the president to refute her readily.

"So it's like qigong or yoga?"

"Indeed. I was taught by an old master I met at a community center taiji class. He claimed that he had trained at Chenjiagou in China's Hubei province. I heard it's also effective for losing weight."

"You sure he's not some old guy from somewhere who's simply boasting about what he learned from watching television?"

"You are truly lacking in dreams. As the saying goes, 'believe well and have well,' right?"

"In that case, you definitely got conned."

After that, President M continued her mysterious training for a while before stopping to rest.

With large beads of sweat appearing on her body, President M picked up a two-liter bottle and gulped down the water in a matter of seconds.

Asya handed over the basket of sandwiches she had brought.

"How considerate. By the way, Haruga's side—"

"I didn't forget. Just now, I already made my way over there to give him the same thing."

"Way to go. Delivering food at opportune moments to emphasize your existence. To think you were able to realize this point, it looks like your feminine charm has grown slightly."

"Yes. I heard that Orihime-san had done this sort of thing earlier, so I immediately followed her example!"

".....I see."

"To distinguish myself from her, I even added something special."

"Oh? What did you put in?"

"A reinvigorating remedy of my own creation. Using the snake I caught at Mount Olympus in Greece, I steeped it in distilled alcohol for roughly half a year to result in a base, finished by adding a secret formula, spices and other things. It can instantly sweep away the fatigue and drowsiness from an all-nighter. Also, it helps with mental clarity."

"By the way, does that Haruga guy know its ingredients?"

"Yes. He was with me when I caught the snake—a European tiger keelback two meters long—and saw the entire process."

"...What a worrisome future I see ahead of you."

Swallowing a cucumber and egg sandwich whole, the president said, "Given the way you are, I think you might as well resort to a woman's ultimate weapon to force a change in the current situation. It might be easier that way..."

"Th-That kind of decisive weapon exists!? Tell me the specifics!"

In response to Asya's question, President M placed a sandwich containing Camembert cheese with three types of ham on her left hand then swung her right palm with a mighty shout.

Compressed between her left and right hands, the sandwich was flattened even more.

President M ingested this panini-like object in one breath as though downing a drink.

"Like this."

"What do you mean!?"

"Pin him down, enjoy... Thereby forcing the conclusion of a carnal relationship!"

"C-Carnal—!? B-But there was one time when we worked late throughout the night and the next morning, I woke up to find the two of us sleeping in the same bed. However, that Haruomi simply got out of bed nonchalantly and left the room..."

"In other words, nothing happened at all despite sharing a bed for a night?"

Listening to Asya recount the past, the president frowned and pondered "Hmm..."

"In terms of a romantic relationship, you two haven't even gotten started in truth..."

"I'm sure it's the same for others if a healthy nubile girl like me isn't getting anywhere! H-Haruomi must be suffering from ED at a young age!"

"But in case of a one in a million—no, a million million million million—chance, it would be best to try it."

"Please don't repeat the word four times!"

"I see, I see. Why don't you go along with this current surge of vigor and try to cast away your usual timid mindset? Perhaps you might change something?"

"Urgh..."

As for Haruga Haruomi, the subject of the intense discussion...

At this very moment, he was in the adjacent building, immersed in his work.

Inside Kogetsu Academy's library next to the cultural clubs building—

The second to sixth underground floors currently served as the temporary Witch Mansion. Hal was on the fourth underground floor where the entire level was being used as a storage facility.

Steel shelves were lined up densely in a close-packed display.

Accumulated haphazardly on the shelves were antiques and ancient artifacts of all kinds. Piled on top of one another endlessly, they looked like junk or odds and ends. This was probably the reason why...

Despite the entire space covering as much as four classrooms, it felt especially cramped.

'Simply locating a specific item here is already a ton of work.'

Hal had made this comment before. Currently, he was in the middle of actualizing it.

He was looking for five types of objects. Iron swords, bronze pots, bronze mirrors, great blades of gilt bronze, red agate—

"But having said that, I've already found six orbs of red agate. Even in the case of iron swords, four have turned up so far."

Hal muttered to himself as though grumbling.

Although interspersed with naps and breaks, he had been working continually since the previous night.

Whenever he found a matching sword, pot, mirror, great blade or red agate, he would pick it out for safekeeping.

Visiting with refreshments earlier, Asya had told him that one night had passed. Without checking the time and being underground, he had lost all sense of time.

The childhood friend had offered to help but Hal refused her.

This was because Hal hoped that as master magi, she and Luna could track down Galad's whereabouts. Besides—

"What I'm currently doing might not turn out to be useful."

In fact, it was more likely to be wasted effort... That being said, it would not be "treasure hunting" if he omitted this type of down-to-earth grunt work.

Just as Hal silently continued his task of filtering and selection—

"You appear to be looking for *that*, brat... But what do you intend to do after finding it?"

The voice belonged to a little girl but its tone was that of a haughty queen.

Hal looked in the voice's direction. The former dragon dressed in a scarlet kimono, Hinokagutsuchi, had materialized behind him without anyone noticing.

Hal did not answer her question. After pondering for a moment, he changed the subject.

"My wand—After that gun came into being, I've had the same dream many times."

"Hmph. You witnessed my final act of going all-out—that scene with the little lass, Yukikaze? The magic wand presumably wishes to help you understand the greatness and strength of the dragon kings."

"You already know the dream's contents, right? I was wondering whether it was your idea to show me that."

"Do I look friendly enough to actively help out like this?"

"Fair point. But you two really were crazy strong in that dream. Still, there's something else that I'm more curious about."

"Oh?"

"I'm a treasure hunter after all. In the end, that thing you discarded as though refusing to hand over to anyone—I'm curious to no end. In other words, that object is worth you doing that."

"Indeed, that thing has its uses for those seeking to understand the secrets of Ruruk Soun's runes."

Hinokagutsuchi jeered in mockery.

"Be that as it may, brat, that thing is beyond the capacity of the likes of you and contemporary witches."

"That's why I have a suggestion. Would you like to enter an alliance with us humans—or rather, me?"

"An alliance? With you, brat?"

"Yeah. Establishing a clear position rather than taking things a step at a time like before. There's no need to talk about respect or putting faith in each other's moral character, so why not think of it as business partners and build a relationship of trust from the ground up?"

Confronted with Hal's suggestion, Hinokagutsuchi replied with undisguised laughter.

"Ha! To think a brat like you who became a Tyrannos by chance is trying to force the queen into an alliance!"

"That's right. After getting a hold of that thing of yours, I want to do an experiment, but regardless of the outcome, it won't go smoothly unless I have your cooperation, which is why I want an alliance. Let's build an amicable relationship of mutual benefit."

"Experiment...? What exactly have you thought up?"

Hinokagutsuchi frowned and glared at Hal. Then she suddenly jumped in surprise.

The color of comprehension began to spread slowly across the self-styled devil's child-like face. She had apparently figured it out. Due to discussing "that" just now, she immediately made the association.

"Since you are harboring such intents, my refusal is even more adamant. I have no intention of agreeing to your request."

"Then it can't be helped. Let's talk about the alternative."

Having predicted Hinokagutsuchi would answer like this, Hal quickly continued.

"Let me use that as a precious research sample! Our forefathers had devoted everything they had to gather ancient knowledge and dragon specimens to study repeatedly, finally establishing the method to synthesize leviathans."

Those involved in this accomplishment included Hal's father, Asya's grandmother and mother, as well as Luna Francois' father, Master Gregory.

Having watched his father's life of work from up close, Hal declared firmly.

"Even if it doesn't come in handy straight away, in five, ten years' time, it could very well become some sort of trump card."

"My remains... Do you mean to desecrate the queen's remains, peasant?"

Instead of scolding him, Hinokagutsuchi spoke calmly.

However, her tone of voice conveyed a queen's pride and dignity of such gravity it was impossible to describe. Still, Hal pretended not to notice and deliberately shrugged mischievously.

"Because that's the proper way to use a 'treasure.'"

Then Hal stared straight at Hinokagutsuchi and said, "I'm sorry to say this but so-called treasure hunting is the same as grave robbery. Those in my line of work have repeatedly done the same to kings and emperors across the world for the past millennia. You're no exception."

"Hmph. Be that as it may, do you believe that by giving this speech..."

After listening to Hal, the former queen of the dragons crossed her arms arrogantly.

"...I would sympathize with you lot? How do you intend to repay the debt from the birth rituals?"

"Since there's no other way, I'll have to find solutions using my own power. Luckily, this thing seems to be 100% loyal to me, unlike you."

Hal summoned the magic gun to his right hand and said, "Last time I asked whether this tool could take your place, you answered that chances of success were very low unless the conditions were all fulfilled. In other words, it is possible for it to replace you."

"Oh...?"

After looking at Hal and the magic gun, Hinokagutsuchi narrowed her eyes.

"Well, the wand is not just an ordinary weapon, after all. It also serves as the guide along the path of unorthodoxy..."

"My hand is forced if you want to keep playing mysterious mastermind. Let's cut our suspicious ties right here and now. Even though it'll be a pain, I'll find more comrades by my own power."

"You realized it, brat?"

Hearing Hal's declaration, Hinokagutsuchi reacted unexpectedly.

For the first time, the dragon queen in a young girl's guise smiled without arrogance. It was as though she was acknowledging Haruga Haruomi's caliber for the first time.

"That does imply you shall become the *devil* in my stead, yes?"

Leaving this question behind, Hinokagutsuchi vanished.

Hal put away his magic gun and sighed. Next, he carefully examined his right hand, where the Rune of the Bow resided, and raised his palm towards the fluorescent light on the ceiling—

"The queen keeps bringing up annoying things repeatedly... As expected of the incumbent devil."

After muttering quietly to himself, Hal returned to his task of sorting through odds and ends.

While eating the sandwiches Asya had personally made, he continued to work.

As for the reinvigorating remedy amidst the refreshments, Hal decided to keep it in reserve for when he actually felt "I seriously... can't go on!"

Although he knew of the reinvigorating remedy's mysterious potency, he was also painfully aware of how it was made. This was not something that could be swallowed carelessly.

Then after roughly two more hours—

The door to the storeroom suddenly opened and a junior female student entered.

It was Shirasaka Hazumi. Like Hal, she was dressed in the Academy's uniform, probably conscious of being in school.

And in her hands, Hazumi was carrying a large travel bag.

"Isn't this Shirasaka? I can't believe you came to school with all the trains stopped."

"I-I asked Luna-san to drive me here..."

Besides Hazumi, every New Town witch was supposed to be at Kanegafuchi.

This was a matter of precaution. They were using a hotel next to the MPD headquarters as accommodates while on standby.

Incidentally, the Juujouji grandfather and the Shirasaka parents, who had been rescued in their unconscious state, were also housed inside a nearby police hospital. This was also to allow the two girls to be able to visit them any time.

"By the way, why did you come here today?"

"I... I came to help."

Faced with his question, Hazumi hesitated a while then said resolutely, "Please allow me to stay here and help out with your 'camp,' Senpai. It is fine even if you do not have work I can do. Whether cooking or laundry, I will work my hardest regardless!"

"Eh...?"

Hearing the adorable junior student announcing her decision to join in, Hal was instantly rendered speechless. But this also meant two members of opposite gender were going to live under one roof—

Confronted with unexpected trouble, Hal kept blinking in surprise.

Part 2

'I am terribly sorry to say that we have yet to locate the dragon that bears the Rune of the Sword.'

"It seems that the elite dragon called Exhos hasn't found him either... But if possible, I'd like us to beat them to the punch. I'm counting on you."

Hal was calling Luna Francois from the underground storeroom.

'Looks you have a plan. Understood, I will try to handle things appropriately.'

"Thanks for your troubles. By the way, is it really okay for Shirasaka to stay here?"

'Her power as a witch is insufficient to participate in the search for the sword dragon. Don't you like having her standby over there? Besides, the Witch Mansion is inside the school too.'

"As long as you say it's okay... But it's just me and Shirasaka staying here alone together, you know?"

'Are you afraid, Mr. Herbivore?'

"No, I quite welcome it, actually. After all, she's so cute."

'You are truly honest to a fault sometimes, Harry... Oh right, the cabinet just made an official request to us, hoping we could defeat and expel the dragons that have invaded New Town.'

"Sure enough, they've dumped all the work on us."

By "us," Luna Francois was referring to the four witches on standby at New Town, which included Hazumi, Orihime and Asya.

'Indeed. Apart from elites, a new dragon king-class opponent has appeared, after all. The SDF and TPD0 will not dispatch forces recklessly.'

"What happened to the people who remained unfrozen?"

'Everyone has been extremely cooperative. They have accepted life in the shelters with rationality and courage. Furthermore, they have not made willful demands to leave New Town. The Japanese people's high moral standards are truly cool and touching.'

"The entire New Senjuu Bridge incident's details were made into a report including a video of what happened then transmitted thoroughly to inform all shelters, after all. Of course the people will behave."

Security cameras installed near the bridge had captured footage at the scene—

Luna Francois was the one who had given orders to use the video after editing. Regarding this matter, this diabolical and capable administrator as well as SAURU cadre had commented "Not like it matters."

'Only by summing up with "morals" would it become a laudable tale of brilliance. Besides, this eliminates the need to divert personnel for surveillance and security, shorthanded as we are to begin with. Let us conclude here for now. See you later, Harry.'

Luna cheerfully said goodbye before hanging up.

Hal looked at his cellphone screen to see that the time was approaching 1pm. Hazumi had asked him to visit upstairs at 1pm...

Recalling this, Hal left the library's underground storage.

Since there was no elevator, Hal climbed up the stairs and arrived at the library's entrance.

Hazumi was not there. Exiting the building to have a look, Hal found his nose instantly stimulated by an aroma. This spicy fragrance undoubtedly came from curry.

"Oh, I was just thinking of going down to call you."

Naturally, this voice, as clear as a bell, belonged to Hazumi.

Arranged in front of the library were four chairs and a foldable table used for camping, set up as an impromptu dining table.

"I tried making lunch... though I'm not confident it is good..."

Reporting demurely, Hazumi was holding a lidded pot in her hands.

The aroma of curry was drifting out from the pot. She had probably carried it over after cooking at the cafeteria kitchen. Furthermore, Hazumi was wearing a yellow apron over her school uniform.

—Uniform x Apron = Infinite Power of Devastation

Witnessing this truth of the universe with his own eyes, Hal could not help but nod in approval. Truly fabulous.

"Here, Senpai, please come over."

After setting the pot on the table, Hazumi pulled out a chair.

She was urging him to sit down. Just as Hal took his seat, Hazumi brought over a tray with two portions of rice, cups filled with mineral water, as well as a plate of salad—

Judging from her slightly unsteady movements, she was not very used to doing this sort of thing.

However, this gesture of Hazumi's earnest care was causing Hal's face to tense up solemnly. Then he smiled and secretly muttered to himself, "Underaged bride... A middle schooler for a wife... This is truly wonderful..."

"...? Did you say something, Senpai?"

"I was just savoring some phrases that surfaced in my mind just now."

"Wow, Senpai, you're a poet!"

"No no no, that'd be too much of an exaggeration."

Faced with Hazumi's highly transparent smile, Hal acted reacted with modesty. However, it really would be "too much of an exaggeration" to call his musings poetic.

"If the food is not to your taste, I apologize in advance..."

"My mouth is probably defective if that actually happened!"

Listening to the reserved and polite junior student offer a warning very much in her style, Hal instantly replied and ate a mouthful of the curry rice. Although Hal always tried his best to dote on Hazumi, this time, he spoke seriously without any intent to flatter, "Yes, it's good."

"Honest!?"

The simple praise elicited a blooming smile in return.

Hal could not help but feel an urge to smile, so he made a serious face and answered "Of course." Thus, Hazumi sat down opposite Hal and the two of them started lunch face to face.

"Since the flavor itself comes from curry roux available on the market, strictly speaking, this is like a joint product between you and a food company, but let's totally disregard that for now. Yeah!"

"Fufufufu. Senpai, you went with the flow and revealed your true thoughts!"

Although Hal had made a slip of the tongue, the generous Hazumi remained smiling.

"In truth, I was hoping you'd enjoy the curry rice even if it turned out to be a bit of a miss... If only I could make something better tasting, sorry."

"No no, that's the kind of mindset which breeds success. By the way, where did this table come from?"

"Luna-san transported it by car when she was driving me here."

"Huh? She's nearby?"

She clearly had not made any mention of it on the phone earlier.

Confronted with the stunned Hal, Hazumi added to explain, "Yes. She is apparently quite interested in your plan, Senpai, and even told me, 'Assist him as much as possible.'"

"I see now..."

Rather than waste time on inquiring at a stage of uncertainty, it would be better to let Hal focus on his task and speed up progress. Was that what Luna thought?

Luna Francois Gregory was not only bold but very meticulous as well.

If Asya was a ferocious beast of the wild, Luna would be the girl equipped with courage and the devil's mastery of details.

"By the way, it's been a while since I last ate at a dining table."

"Oh—Sorry. Would it be better if you could work while you ate!?"

"Nah, although that is better in many cases and that's how I've always done things. However, I think it's nice to eat like this for a change of pace every now and then."

Hal candidly explained to the apologizing Hazumi.

Since Asya was also the type to immerse herself completely when serious, she had departed swiftly after dropping off sandwiches, knowing that staying longer would be pointless. Hal was well aware of this too. That being said, Hal definitely felt relaxed, basking in Hazumi's very feminine care and warmth.

In this manner, Hal finished lunch and breathed a sigh of relief.

After relaxing fully, a sense of intense fatigue suddenly surged.

He had been cutting back on sleep for almost half a month now, clocking in mundane work without pause. All this was for the sake of that—"treasure hunting."

The goal was right before his eyes. He was one step away.

"Woah."

Hal jumped in surprise because someone suddenly touched his shoulders.

Without him noticing, Hazumi had circled around behind him and started to massage Hal's shoulders.

"Senpai, this is shocking. You're so stiff."

"Stiff—!?"

Hearing Hazumi's smiling voice from behind, Hal forcefully opened his eyes wide.

"I-Is something the matter?"

"Those words seemed to light a fire inside my heart—No wait, Hazumi. You don't have to go this far. After all, I'm still young..."

Hal disguised his lewd reaction and declined Hazumi's kind offer.

However, the unfazed Hazumi continued to massage his shoulders.

Although her delicate fingers were not very strong, she accurately brought relief to the aching parts with skill and thoughtfulness.

"Please don't be shy. Contrary to appearances, I am actually used to doing this because I frequently offer massages to my grandfather and father. Senpai, your shoulders are really stiff."

"...I guess you're right."



"May I ask what you have been working on the whole time lately?"

"...Failure will be scary if I carelessly put up your hopes. But things will come to a conclusion either tonight or tomorrow, so let's wait until after that if possible..."

"Very well. Then I shall be patient and not hurry you. Oh, by the way, Senpai."

"What is it?"

"Since you look very tired, I have prepared something nice for you tonight. So please hang in there a little longer until things reach a conclusion."

After massaging his shoulders for a while, Hazumi left with these parting words.

Hal pondered when he returned to the library's underground level.

Although Hazumi probably did not go as far as to conspire secretly, she would always help Hal catch a break at appropriate moments, encouraging him while refraining from pestering him with incessant questions—

Perhaps Hazumi was unexpectedly adept at getting along with someone in Hal's line of work.

While feeling impressed at how Hazumi was surprisingly suitable as an assistant, Hal resumed his work. Namely—Filtering through the piles of ancient artifacts and antiques to select his targets.

After spending four hours underground like this, Hal returned to the surface again.

It was past six in the evening. Hal left the library to look for Hazumi. The setting sun was dyeing the school building and sports ground an orange color.

"Senpai! Are you done already!?"

Hazumi happened to be walking towards him.

Confronted with a junior student who had changed into the school's PE uniform for some reason, Hal said, "Yeah. The task is over in a way, so I was thinking of taking a break."

"Then please come over with me. I have prepared 'something nice' as promised."

Hazumi pulled Hal by the hand towards where she had come from.

If memory served Hal correct, ahead of them was—Three minutes later, Hal confirmed that his memory was correct. This was the building where the rooms of the athletic clubs were gathered.

The cultural clubs building was four stories, but the athletic clubs building was wide and single story.

Hazumi entered the building and began to walk into its depths. Soon, the two of them arrived at the girls changing room. Ahead was the holy sanctuary protected by a glass door—in other words, the female bathroom.

Fully equipped with showers and a bath for students of athletic clubs to wash their sweat away, this was a space of soothing.

"Please come here, Senpai."

"Huh!? In other words, you're asking me to enter the female bathroom!?"

"Yes. There isn't a single soul in the school apart from us. I think there shouldn't be a problem."

Hazumi smiled tenderly and said, "A student from the track and field team showed me before how to use this place. I heard that putting hot water in the bath was a job for underclassmen, so everyone seems to know how it's done."

"So this is what they call the tradition of athletic clubs..."

"I prepared this specially, hoping it could help alleviate your fatigue somewhat," said Hazumi cheerfully.

In recent days, Hal had not even bothered to take baths properly, always opting for quick showers instead. Indeed, such a gift might be more fitting than any other.

—Hence, ten minutes passed.

"Hooooooooo..."

Enjoying a hot soak in a large bath for the first time in a long while, Hal relaxed greatly.

"...Oh dear, although this is normally a female bath, it'd be too ungentlemanly to engage in obscene delusions here. I've got to be careful."

Despite his self-awareness as a closet pervert, Hal still wanted to exercise gentlemanly restraint. Due to the vast amount of imagined scenes surfacing in his mind, Hal had to convince himself in this manner.

Then just as he was getting out of the bath, Hal heard an unexpected voice.

"Excuse me, Senpai... Please pardon my intrusion."

It was Hazumi. She was speaking politely from outside the bathroom. Furthermore, what came next was the sound of the glass door sliding open. "!?"

Hal grabbed a towel and frantically wrapped it around his waist.

He looked back, only to be greeted by the unbelievable sight of Hazumi entering the bathroom in her PE uniform.

Witnessing the exposed sight of his underclassman's delicate limbs and those dazzlingly pale thighs, Hal was greatly shaken.

"Shirasaka, why did you come in here!?"

"U-Umm, I was thinking of washing your back for you..."

"This is clearly an unnecessary show of concern, indeed!"

"R-Really? In the past, I washed my father's back when he was fatigued from work and he was very happy..."

"Probably because you were only in kindergarten or elementary school at the time, right?"

"—! Senpai, you're so amazing. How did you know!?"

"A deduction most elementary, my dear Watson. Putting that aside, it's time for you to leave."

"A-As you wish..."

For some reason, Hazumi was walking out of the bathroom with a hurt expression. Although the sadness shown on side of the junior student's face was causing Hal's heart to tremble, at least he was left on his own now. Relieved for now, Hal returned to the bathtub.

Soaking himself in hot water up to his shoulders, he intended to count up to a hundred to calm his mind—

However, the glass door clattered again as it slid open.

Hal looked behind him in trepidation and was immediately stunned. Hazumi had entered the bathroom again.

This time, she was not in her PE uniform. Instead, her slender body was wrapped in nothing more than a bath towel.

"E-Excuse me..."

After issuing a greeting first, Hazumi entered the bathroom and came to Hal's side.

Her entire body was bright red in addition to her face, most likely due to embarrassment more than the heat of the water. Compared to the PE uniform earlier, there was not much difference in terms of the area of exposed skin.

However, those smooth shoulders were completely laid bare and even the area around the base of the thighs could be seen—

Hence, the shocking impact was almost double compared to before.

"S-Shirasaka? What the heck are you...?"

"U-Umm, Senpai, please take a bath with me!"

"Huh!?"

"I have given it plenty of thought. The reason why you can entrust the rune's power to Nee-sama... but not me, is ultimately due to this sort of difference..."

"Huh?"

"Because Nee-sama became able to use the rune's power... Senpai, after you saw that."

Hazumi brought up "that" in embarrassment, prompting Hal to remember.

Half a month earlier, there was an accident when Juujouji Orihime was taking a bath. Blessed with unexpected good fortune at the time, Hal had been treated to an eyeful of heaven.

"T-That is why I wondered if this sort of experience might be what is lacking between us, Senpai. I-If I could bare my body and soul to you like Nee-sama, to go as far as to wash your back, Senpai, I believe our hearts can surely become connected...!"

"T-Taking a bath together for this kind of a reason, that's way too extreme!"

"I want to become stronger... to be able to use the rune's power by winning your trust like Nee-sama and Asya-san, to help even more people—I must do this."

Within the same tub of hot water, Hazumi leaned against Hal.

Thanks to that, Hal was able to see her maturing figure clearly. Nothing less expected from Orihime's cousin. At the tender age of an eighth grader, she had already developed ample volume.

Although one could not be certain whether she would grow to match Orihime's size, she would probably mature into a voluptuous figure at this rate.

Despite his state of confusion arising from Hazumi's behavior, Hal still suppressed the embarrassment in his heart.

Wanting to become stronger for the sake of helping others. The benevolent and responsible girl had expressed resolve that matched her character. Sure enough, Hal wanted to respond to these feelings of hers.

"To be honest, if you're the recipient, Shirasaka... I think the rune's power can probably be entrusted to you."

"Ehhhh!?"

"I'm ashamed to say this, but my own resolve is the reason why I've neglected the matter all this time. It looks like I've caused you a lot of unease, so I'm really sorry."

"Resolve... What do you mean by that?"

"In Asya and Juujouji's cases, I desperately wanted to avoid casualties at the time, so I went with the flow and did it."

Hal confessed while sighing lightly.

"But after being entrusted with a rune of Ruruk Soun, a witch's life will become even more chaotic than before. Like this time, getting caught up in conflicts caused by monsters beyond the elites, things like that might become 'commonplace' in the future."

"....."

"That's why I haven't been able to muster my resolve, but—"

Hal muttered quietly.

"I fear the time I have for hesitation is running out soon... Shirasaka, I will give you a clear answer within the near future. Could you wait a bit longer for me?"

"V-Very well... But I am relieved now."

Hazumi pressed her hand against the towel over her chest and spoke softly.

"Actually, I had been agonizing over how I could earn your trust, Senpai."

"What are you talking about? Aren't we friends already?"

"Really? Fufu, I'm so happy to hear that—Oh, then allow me to ask you once again... Would you like me to wash your back?"

"W-Why are you still bringing this up!?"

"Because... Senpai, we are friends, aren't we? Right now, we have already laid our thoughts bare to each other without hiding anything—And it's a rare chance too..."

Thinking about it calmly, Hal knew that this was not an issue of rareness at all, but he could not help but nod.

Influenced by the current circumstances, he and Hazumi were probably in a state of excitement.

"I-I see. So 'this is a rare chance' is one way to look at it..."

"Y-Yes! I will do my very best!"

"Actually, I've never had anyone wash my back, but I guess there's a first time for everything—"

Despite his fear of what would happen if Juujouji were to find out, Hal still found himself wavering in the face of temptation.

At that moment, a ringtone could be heard coming from the changing room.

It was Hal's cellphone. Clearly he could ignore it, but a guilty conscience was tormenting him. Hence, he rushed out of the bath while leaving behind words of "I-I'm going to have a look!"

Hal dashed straight into the changing room and checked his cellphone. The caller's name happened to be displayed on the screen.

".....Hello, Haruga speaking."

'Ah, Haruga-kun. I've arrived in school now. Is Hazumi there too? I brought food, so let us have dinner together. By the way, Haruga-kun, where are you right now and what are you doing?'

"I-I was just taking a bath, yeah."

'Is it the athletic clubs building by any chance? They have showers and baths there too. In that case, let me head that way too. I am already in front of the library.'

"N-No, you don't need to come over, Juujouji!"

Hazumi's cousin, Juujouji Orihime was apparently talking on the phone while walking. Although Hal tried his hardest to persuade his observant classmate...

'Don't worry, walking over from here won't take five minutes. See you later.'

However, she simply hung up.

Hal hastily rushed into the bathroom and yelled to his underclassman, "Oh no! Juujouji is coming over. We've got to hurry!"

"Eh, Nee-sama!?"

Part 3

"Even so, where on earth has the dragon bearing the Rune of the Sword disappeared to?"

Luna Francois was speaking from the driver's seat while steering boldly.

The domestic luxury sports car entered a sharp corner of the New Town Highway's Tatsumi Junction without losing speed at all, making the turn by following an ideal out-in-out line.

Despite her young age of sixteen years, Luna was an incurable speed demon.

Looking at the speedometer which read 200 km/h, Asya frowned from the front passenger seat.

"Please don't race wantonly just because it's an emergency situation."

"Who cares? There are no other cars driving after all. Besides, I haven't even broke 300 km/h."

Tokyo New Town had essentially turned into a ghost town.

There were almost no pedestrians or vehicles on the road. However, rare exceptions like Asya and Luna should still be present somewhere.

"I attempted to use Detection magic all around New Town for the past two days, but could not find any signs of an elite-size dragon in hiding..." said Asya.

She was replying to her fellow witch's earlier murmuring.

"I believe it is extremely likely that he has shrunk his size to take on a Draconian form to hide."

"Oh actually, I have an unfavorable conjecture."

Hearing Luna speak as though a sudden thought had occurred to her, Asya frowned.

Luna Francois' so-called "unfavorable conjectures" often came true with very high probabilities.

"The girl who called herself a dragon king earlier was in human form, yes? If elite dragons were able to cast magic to turn themselves into humans, then..."

"Right! The elite we fought some time ago also said it was possible but undesirable!"

"Disguising as a human and hiding among New Town's refugees would be highly probable. The dragons forbade us humans to leave Tokyo because they are worried of this possibility, right?"

"True, it'd make sense if that's the case..."

With that, the search for Pavel Galad escalated greatly in difficulty.

Furthermore, the Raptors in search of Galad would even attack the people remaining in New Town—The risk of this happening probably increased in likelihood too.

"It looks like it'll be increasingly necessary to rely on Haruomi's rune."

"Indeed. I wonder if Hazumi-san and Orihime-san are assisting him well?"

"—!? L-Luna, what did you just say!?"

Carrying the two worried master magi, the race car sped in Kiba's direction.

At the makeshift dining table that Hazumi had set up before the library...

Orihime, Hal and Hazumi, the three of them were seated around the foldable table. The main dish for tonight was the curry rice cooked during lunch time by the youngest girl present.

Hal did not know if the school location was the reason, but Orihime was also dutifully dressed in uniform.

"Hazumi and Haruga-kun, you both seem a bit unsettled. Did something happen?"

"N-Nothing, it's just that the curry's a bit spicy."

"T-That's right. It really is a tad too spicy, Senpai."

"...Really? On the contrary, I find it to be medium spicy to an exceedingly ordinary level."

Hal and Hazumi's bathroom episode had taken place roughly an hour earlier.

After that, Hal had dried himself and gotten dressed with lightning speed before heading out of the club building to greet Orihime. During that time,

Hazumi also made herself presentable then met up with them with feigned composure.

Thanks to that, their problematic behavior had not come to light. Thus, dinner started without issue.

However, Hal and Hazumi had yet to dispel the uneasiness in their hearts. They were still far from returning to normal.

"B-By the way, Juujouji, why did you suddenly come over?"

"Well, of course I am here to assist and monitor you, Haruga-kun."

"Monitor'!?"

"Yes. Since Hazumi is staying over here too, I was thinking someone needs to monitor you, Haruga-kun, so as to prevent the dark side of the Force manifesting within you. As such, this humble Juujouji Orihime has volunteered to shoulder this responsibility."

"No no no, I can't possibly do such unspeakable things to Shirasaka. That's what I believe. Essentially. Probably."

"See? Although your assertions cannot be trusted seeing as you are the self-styled closet pervert, the case is even more evident now that you have failed to make an assertion. Don't you agree, Hazumi?"

"I-I think that... S-Senpai is the one person who won't do such things, Nee-sama!"

"See that, Haruga-kun? Even Hazumi cannot believe in her own words with full conviction, which is why her gaze is currently this unsteady. As such, my coming to monitor you is not entirely meaningless, is it?"

" "....." "

Hal and Hazumi could not help but fall silent in response to Orihime's words.

Due to the vividness of their most recent memories, they could not muster a strong rebuttal.

However, Hal remembered something just as the trio were essentially done with dinner.

"Come to think of it, I forgot to call President M over."

"Oh, about the president, she already ate five bowls of curry at dusk. She said she had to eat dinner early because she was going to the pool for butterfly stroke training."

"Swimming immediately after eating so much, that's quite amazing of her. Nothing less expected of the president."

"That really is quite astounding, but isn't she engaged in training for some kind of unknown superpower?"

Hal muttered while imagining President M swimming the butterfly stroke. That massive body, estimated to weigh 140 kg, propelled along the water surface. Such a sight, the embodiment of mystery and horror, would probably rival that of the famous White Whale, Moby Dick.

Despite his burning curiosity to witness the president's swimming appearance, Hal decided he still had work to take care of.

"I'm about to start wrapping up my task. How about you two come along? I could tell you what I've been doing all this time."

Possibly because this was the first time for Hal to willingly explain his undertaking—

Hazumi and Orihime looked up abruptly and immediately nodded. Taking the two girls, Hal returned to the library's underground storage level.

A number of selected items were placed on a blue tarp laid out in a corner of the floor.

Six rusted fragments of iron swords, four slightly filthy bronze pots, two Gabuntai divine beast mirrors of bronze, one blade of gilt bronze, and nine orbs of red agate.

"I believe that out of all these things, one of them is a former dragon king's heartmetal... Hinokagutsuchi's."

The words Hal finally uttered caused Orihime and Hazumi to stare wide-eyed.

Late at night. It was after 10pm...

Hal was still in the library's underground storeroom. He was rapidly browsing through reference materials spread out on a table. At this moment, the door opened and Orihime entered alone.

"How's Shirasaka?"

"Presumably exhausted. She already went to bed."

The girls were staying in an office on the library's ground floor.

Hazumi had apparently retired for the night there, probably tired out by cooking and preparing the bath, tasks which she was unused to. Frail in health to begin with, she was definitely not a girl with abundant energy.

However, while the two of them were alone, Orihime said with some displeasure in her expression, "Hazumi loves you inexplicably, Harugakun..."

"L-Love!?"

"Although she is very kind with a personality like an angel's, this is still my first time seeing her go such lengths for someone other than me or family."

"What? So by love you were referring to the likes of familial love."

"...Are you by any chance confident that she would offer you another kind of love?"

"O-Of course not. We're senior and junior students, my conscience is clear."

"Oh? But lately, it seems that there have been many opportunities for you two to spend time together alone."

Orihime was usually cheerful, lively and caring, but right now, her stinging words were frequently mocking Hal. What on earth was going on?

And today, Hal was also harboring a guilty conscience about the bathroom episode.

If she were to continue pursuing the matter, perhaps he might let slip unnecessary information.

"It feels like you're acting jealous today, Juujouji. Even if I've snatched your cousin away from you..."

Hal tried to strike back in a somewhat contrived manner. He had a feeling that his position would progressively worsen if he stayed on defense the whole time. However, this ended up eliciting an unexpected reaction.

Orihime was sudden stunned, looking quite shocked.

"J-Jealous—!? D-Do I really sound like that!?"

"Well, umm, just a personal opinion, I guess? I'm the only one who got this impression."

Although Hal asked Orihime not to worry, she did not take his words to heart. Murmuring softly, she was saying things that were hard to make out.

"I am jealous—jealous over Hazumi. To think I unintentionally... this sort of matter that has no need to be brought up..."

"J-Juujouji?"

"Forget about the conversation just now, Haruga-kun! Never mind, I have something else to talk about!"

Forcibly changing the subject, Orihime said, "You're not hiding something from us by any chance, are you?"

"Uh, recently I've been occupied with trying to locate Hinokagutsuchi's heartmetal—"

"I already heard about that. I'm asking if there is anything else. For example, about your body, Haruga-kun, or the like."

"I've written about runes and dragon kings in the report, so there's nothing I need to hide particularly."

"I already read that report too. You wrote plenty about Kagutsuchi-san and the encounter with the man in black... but you omitted the most important part."

The man in the black suit, Sophocles, was a mysterious being who claimed to be a human instead of a dragon.

Taking a "believe it or not" mindset, Hal had candidly included in his report an organized account regarding the Road to Kingship and the encounter with that man. However—

"The possibility that you might turn into a dragon—This was not mentioned anywhere at all."

"Oh my, that's too far-fetched and ridiculous after all."

"Please allow me to confirm one matter tactfully. You haven't mentioned this to Asya-san either, have you?"

"....."

"I somehow feel that you wouldn't have concealed it if you were truly not worried, Haruga-kun."

"...Well, I don't deny taking various measures due to this reason. Even disregarding various issues such as possibly turning into a dragon, I'm apparently destined to die out in the streets at some point in time."

By the time he noticed, Orihime's worried gaze was already focused on him.

After looking into her eyes and nodding, Hal turned his gaze to a corner of the storeroom. This was the location of the enchanted artifacts and antiques that could potentially be Hinokagutsuchi's heartmetal.

"Although I've no right to say this, I still want to help future generations a bit."

"F-Future generations?"

"Yeah. Well, a dragon would probably say something like 'fighting is my duty.' But as it so happens, I'm human and a treasure hunter to boot."

The conflict revolving around the dragonslaying runes was apparently known as the Road to Kingship.

The mysterious man, Sophocles, had called it a type of quest and described it as a game. It was surely a great adventure involving numerous battles like an epic RPG.

"Even if those guys prefer authentic orthodox RPGs, I'm not obliged to humor them. I'll ignore the proper script and focus on finding loopholes in the system or mini-games to play. Then I'll take all of my gathered gold to redeem somewhere else."

"Indeed... Haruga-kun, you're still a mortal."

After listening to Hal's explanation, Orihime smiled faintly.

"Then as the only friend privy to your secret, let me make myself clear. If anything happened to make you suffer so much that you'd want to cry during the night, call me. I will listen to you as long as I have time and visit you if I have the opportunity to do so."

"...I'm not that fragile."

"Hard to say. You may find yourself cornered in the future."

"I see. Then I'll gratefully remember your offer."

"Yes, it's a promise. In addition, please call me without reserve when you need a comrade-in-arms. Let's work together and give it our best like last time."

"Last time huh..."

"...Haruga-kun, are you having indecent thoughts by any chance?"

"Of course not. I'm just remembering the intense battle."

"But you always act especially serious whenever you're having lustful thoughts, you know?"

"Have I been seen through!?"

Hal's tense and proper expression was exposed by Orihime with a single comment.

In truth, Hal was definitely recalling that particular instant. The five fingers of his right hand had sunk into Orihime's soft body part that was about the size of a small cantaloupe, enjoying the excellent suppleness.

"Next time, you are not allowed to touch me in such an obscene manner!"

Orihime scolded angrily.

"Back then, Haruga-kun, you were squeezing my breast as hard as you could, refusing to let go no matter what..."

"Juujouji, it's probably because your breasts are too majestic, that's why I accidentally—"

"This kind of dirty talk is not allowed!"

"S-Sorry..."

As a side note, he had not written about the "action for transmitting power" undertaken at the time either, for no special reason except that Hal himself judged that it was not definitely something to be disclosed.

While bowing his head to apologize, Hal realized.

Orihime apparently said "next time" just now... Hal stared at her face in surprise.

Although his classmate and novice witch was still showing an offended expression, she had turned her gaze away in embarrassment to murmur, "I-It cannot be helped either. The next battle will surely be a tough ordeal and even a queen of the dragons has appeared... B-But don't you get the wrong idea!"

Orihime's tone of voice turned feeble mid-sentence as though in an attempt to argue, only turning into what seemed a little like anger at the end.

"It happened only because I had no choice, ultimately necessitated by battle!"

"O-Of course. I'll carve this in my heart."

"It is absolutely not because I enjoy it..."

"I figured. I absolutely won't have any weird misunderstandings."

"B-But putting this aside, I mentioned earlier as well, since fate has brought us together so much, I think I would be totally fine with dating you."

"Oh, okay."

"That is what I think..."

For some reason, towards the end, Orihime kept staring into Hal's eyes as though trying to tell him something.

Orihime's eyes were a bit moist. Her gaze caused Hal's heart to race. He even felt that if he were to say certain "magic words" this instant, it would decisively change something.

But would that be okay? Clearly she had told him not to get the wrong idea.

Just as Hal found himself in a conundrum, Orihime suddenly reacted with surprise. As though chastising herself "What am I saying!?", she shook her head forcefully and suddenly shouted, "R-Right, Haruga-kun! Next, let us talk about what is over here!"

Orihime pointed at the materials laid out on the table.

Photocopies of ancient Japanese texts. These had been ordered recently by the used bookstore, Mirokudou, a special purchase Hal had asked Kenjou Genya to make.

At the same time, this was information about Hinokagutsuchi—the red dragon queen.

This was what Hal had originally intended to discuss with Orihime and Hazumi tonight.

Part 4

The materials Hal had prepared was a certain shrine's historical record.

A so-called historical record referred to a document recording a shrine or temple's roots and origins. This particular shrine was located in the Tokai region of Honshu on the Pacific shore. Established during the early Kamakura period, its history stretched quite far back.

Every generation of the chief priest left behind diaries and notes. All related documents that could be obtained were all gathered here.

"Tracing back to the root, my encounter with Hinokagutsuchi at the Witch Mansion was the beginning of everything."

Hal renewed his vigor and began to recount tirelessly.

"However, can my encounter with her be explained simply by coincidence?"

"Haruga-kun, do you believe there was a reason why you two met?"

A question from the audience, Orihime, prompted Hal to nod.

"Yes. In the beginning, I thought she was a ghost attracted by the Mansion's spiritual energy, but lately, I've thought of other possibilities."

That dream was the clue that had inspired Hal.

The Crimson Queen had committed suicide to decide the battle between dragon kings. At the time, the queen i.e. Hinokagutsuchi had dug out her own heartmetal and cast it down to the earth.

After repeatedly experiencing the dream, Hal had confirmed clearly.

The heartmetal had undoubtedly fallen somewhere along a series of curved islands—Japan.

"These all come from the collection at Shin-Kiba's Witch Mansion... Books and objects related to magic and collected from all over Japan."

"Speaking of which, the library there was also where I met you, Haruga-kun."

"And then, rather than Hinokagutsuchi—a dragon's ghost—showing up in the Mansion for no reason, I believe it'd be more convincing to say that she was haunting an enchanted artifact related to her."

"What you mean, Haruga-kun... is that artifact has been moved here together with the Mansion?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm trying to say."

Saying that, Hal looked at Orihime squarely.

"Banking on this idea, which is more like a whim than a hypothesis, I tried to search through the Mansion's catalog. Among the densely written list of items, I ended up discovering the 'five types of divine treasures related to Goddess Hinokagutsuchi.'"

Iron sword, bronze pot, Gamontai divine beast mirror, great blade of gilt bronze and red agate.

These were itemized as the "five divine treasures."

Hal had picked out everything matching the description and placed them in this corner.

"This so-called Hinokagutsuchi was the name of the *fire god* appearing in Japanese mythology, right? But rather than a goddess, he was genuinely a male deity. But here, it's written as goddess on purpose."

Hal was quite well-versed in fields such as mythology, history, archaeology and folkloristics.

In order to gather the Grave Goods used in covenant rituals between "serpents" and witches—magical apparatus for enshrined object emulation—Hal had learnt a great deal of knowledge.

"There is one theory that the sun goddess Amaterasu was actually a *male god*. However, this is my first time seeing Hinokagutsuchi in gender reversal. This really bothered me, so I tried to investigate the shrine that venerated Goddess Hinokagutsuchi's divine treasures... I investigated its origins."

Hence, Hal had made a request to Kenjou, asking him to delegate to a certain SAURU branch in the Tokai region the task of gathering information about the shrine in question.

"During the Ken'ei era—in other words, the early Kamakura period—the 'fire god's fragment' fell from the sky. Reportedly, 'a goddess that looked like a child' appeared beside the pillow of a villager who had collected the fragment."

"Looked like a child... That's the same as Kagutsuchi-san."

"Thereafter, the fire god's fragment was venerated as divine treasures for which a shrine was built."

"But concluding that Kagutsuchi-san's heartmetal comprises those treasures based on this... Aren't you overthinking things?"

"Responding to your point, I saw it in a dream."

"D-Dream!?"

Confronted with the surprised Orihime, Hal explained the magic gun's guidance and *Hinokagutsuchi's last moments*.

In particular, "the heartmetal dropped by the red dragon king from the stratosphere" was related to "the origins of the shrine worshipping Goddess Hinokagutsuchi."

"Hinokagutsuchi had said something that could be construed as an admission to this, so I think it's surprisingly probable that my hunch is correct. But it also depends on whether she was lying or not."

"Kagutsuchi-san... probably wouldn't lie, right? After all, she has so much pride."

Orihime commented on the personality of the self-styled devil who was nowhere to be seen.

"As if anyone would stoop as low as lying to you, that's what I feel she'd say."

"I agree. That's why I tried to pick out all the artifacts whose appearance match the five types of divine treasures related to Goddess Hinokagutsuchi."

The heartmetals of dragons and 'serpents' are mostly precious metals in spherical form, so the red agate—one of them—should be the most likely." Just red agate alone, there were already nine pieces. Every orb was chipped or cracked.

Then there were six iron swords, four bronze pots, two divine beast mirrors made of bronze and a blade of gilt bronze. Looking at these selected objects, Hal crossed his arms.

"It's also possible that rocks or metals fallen from the sky were melted down and processed, so I can't jump to conclusions. How should I confirm...?"

"Can't you use a treasure hunter's intuition or experience to find a solution?"

"Unfortunately, a dragon's heartmetal isn't part of my professional expertise."

Hal shrugged and muttered, "Although I tried reading a part of the collected information, hoping there might be clues... It was futile. I'm guessing nothing essential will be found in the unread remainder too."

The gathered ancient texts were laid out on the table.

Hal had hastily read through the shrine's historical record, which the chief priest had recompiled during the Meiji period, as well as the chief priest's diary that had recorded shrine related matters.

The remainder consisted of materials dating earlier back to the Edo period and even the Muromachi period.

However, he would have to be prepared to spend a great deal of time if he wanted to read these materials in detail. And he was not optimistic regarding whether corresponding rewards could be reaped.

"Even if I used magical methods to check—"

Hal stared intently and activated magical sight.

The majority of the various artifacts selected as heartmetal candidates glowed faintly. The rest of them were shrouded in dim mist instead. However, enchanted artifacts carried magical or mystical energies to begin with, which was why they were housed in the Witch Mansion. This was an expected and logical result.

"It doesn't seem particularly meaningful..."

"How difficult..."

"I might as well bring a police dog and have it look for things with Hinokagutsuchi's scent, how about that?"

"But she is a ghost without a scent to begin with, right?"

"Since she's able to eat and touch things, she should have a tangible body of sorts. I've also gathered a portion of her remains."

Hal picked up a flask kept on the side of the table.

"Back when I received the Rune of the Bow, Hinokagutsuchi had briefly and temporarily revived her past body—the one she had as a dragon—to drive away the pursuing dragon."

"Ahhh! It was when the dragons were targeting us in Old Tokyo!"

"Yeah. Back then, Hinokagutsuchi's body quickly crumbled into dust and was blown away by the wind... But I gathered some of it from the scene at Tokyo Station. After thoroughly eliminating sand and dust, this remaining powder is what used to be part of a dragon's body."

The flask in Hal's hand was filled with white powder.

The dragon king known as the Crimson Queen in the past—part of the scattered remains when her body collapsed. Hal had gathered it as a sample.

Looking at the flask and the white powder, Orihime exhaled.

"How astounding, to think you went to such lengths... It's a bit beyond my imagination."

"Rather, it's better to say this is my field of expertise in the first place. Brandishing a weird gun to fight dragons in massive battles is the special exception instead. However—"

Hal sighed, naturally because of gloom.

"What comes next is hard to say."

"Eh? Haruga-kun, don't tell me you intend to switch careers to become a hero!?"

"I know I'm not cut out for it, at least. If I'm going to switch careers, I'd most likely change to something even more useless."

After chuckling ironically, Hal looked up above him.

"Sigh, let's get back on topic. The current problem is finding the heartmetal. It's probably pointless even if I bring a police dog or a drug detection dog. What to do?"

"Speaking of dogs... Isn't Akuro-Ou similar to a dog?"

Hal could not help but smile wryly because Orihime was speaking with a serious expression.

"No no, no matter the resemblance, she's ultimately just a dog-like non-living creature—"

"But if it's her, she should be quite sensitive towards magic-related things and dragon presences, shouldn't she?"

Hal wanted to dismiss the notion with a laugh, but immediately changed his mind.

The leviathan named Akuro-Ou possessed a form intermediate between a fox and a wolf. But regardless, nothing changed the fact that she belonged in the canid family.

And just as Orihime had pointed out, one might place their hopes on her superior senses to surpass what could be achieved by smell—

"So this is what Akuro-Ou selected."

Hal pointed at an orb of red agate, seven centimeters or so in diameter. Roughly a third of it was missing and the surface was covered with tiny cracks.

Next to the outdoor dining table in front of the library, Hal was explaining to Asya and Luna Francois.

As a side note, the two girls were dressed identically in the Academy's uniform.

"A former dragon king's heartmetal. The 'fire god's fragment' that had fallen from the sky roughly eight hundred years ago. Hinokagutsuchi's spirit dwells within this thing."

A night had passed since Akuro-Ou finished appraising.

This was already the fourth morning after the dragon king's army had "occupied" Tokyo.

Last night, Hal and Orihime had moved the various artifacts, heartmetal candidates, out to the sports ground then summoned Akuro-Ou. As before when they summoned her in Old Tokyo, she was shrunk down to roughly three meters in body length.

Then Akuro-Ou examined these artifacts like a drug detection dog.

The result of the appraisal was now reflecting the sun's morning rays on the table. It was one of the nine orbs of red agate.

"...But we still can't be 100% certain."

"However, judging from your description, this possibility seems to be highly likely."

Luna Francois nodded while Asya murmured on the side, "R-Right. Thanks to Haruomi and Orihime-san, the dragon king's heartmetal was found... But come to think of it, I can't believe you were happily flirting away with a girl under the same roof..."

"Fufu. This is also an outcome of camping together~~"

Asya was making a sour face for some reason. In contrast, Luna Francois was beaming on purpose.

"After thoroughly enjoying a camping life served by two young beauties, commonly known as having a lady on each arm, Harry's motivation must have risen to the highest point, yes?"

"Haruomi! You're better off acting like a herbivore and doing nothing as always!"

"But actually, I enjoyed it quite a bit... It's also true that they helped out a lot..."

"Fufu. If it pleases you, I could arrange another one next time, how about that?"

"...If a chance comes up, please do lend your assistance."

"Gah, you traitor!"

"It's clearly just camping together in harmony, why am I getting scolded...?"

Denounced by Asya, Hal tilted his head in puzzlement.

Meanwhile, Orihime and Hazumi had gone over to the cultural clubs building next door to deliver breakfast to President M.

Hal looked at the table again. Apart from the heartmetal of red agate, there was also the flask of white powder gathered from the remains of Hinokagutsuchi's collapsed body.

"We need to gather samples of this type in vast quantities for research. The ultimate goal is to create 'new imitations,' I guess."

"New imitations?"

"Different from the current leviathans?"

"Yeah. Instead of imitation dragons, imitation dragon kings."

Hearing Hal, the master witches jumped in surprise.

The "serpents" they controlled were precisely "imitation dragons," but compared to elites and dragon kings, "serpents" were undoubtedly feeble beings.

"Think about it for a second. Didn't our parents' generation discover within arctic ice the creation of ancient magi, a homunculus in dragon form—a goddess of antiquity—thereby using them as a reference to synthesize leviathans?"

"Yes. That goddess is Grandmother Immortal."

"And right now, she continues to live in Istanbul's underground, the grandmother and archetype of all 'serpents.'"

Since the trio had been involved with SAURU starting from their parents' generation, communication was particularly easy.

The two girls immediately understood what Hal was implying.

"Anyway, after securing this heartmetal—"

Looking at the red agate on the table, Hal whispered quietly, "As the first modern human to discover 'the power of dragonbane,' I wish to fulfill my obligations to future generations. Even if I were to perish in the immediate future, resulting in the loss of the Rune of the Bow... My intent is to leave something like a sapling of hope for future generations by securing this heartmetal."

"Haruomi, it's time for—"

Just by listening to this introduction, Asya understood.

Completely setting aside her earlier expression of bitterness, she nodded solemnly.

"Yeah, Rushalka's rebirth. Apart from that, I guess we've got to attempt the challenge of retaking Tokyo New Town. Still, it feels like 'there's nothing to lose' in trying to retake New Town."

Hal chanted a magic incantation. In truth, it was an exceedingly difficult mission.

"An elite alone would be fine, but this time, there is a dragon king and her minion backing him."

"If we were to fail, New Town would be abandoned immediately, scrapping the city—Isn't that right?"

Luna Francois and Asya concurred rather irresponsibly.

Precisely because they knew best how formidable were the enemies that had shown up at New Town, they did not recklessly speak in optimistic tones.

In any case, the master-class witches and Hal nodded at one another.

"By the way, can I ask a question, Luna?"

Once the discussion reached a conclusion, Hal changed the subject.

At the same time, he stared at this American girl who had inexplicably changed into the Academy's female uniform like Asya. Starting from the moment he saw her this morning, Hal had been very curious.

"Why are you in uniform today?"

"Do as the Romans do, so the saying goes. Besides, wearing the same attire allows my physical traits to be more clearly contrasted against Asya's♪"

"W-What do you mean by contrast!? Sure, it's true that Luna's slightly more curvy!"

"Not slightly but far more voluptuous, yes? However, I might possibly lose out to Orihime-san. Japanese figures are marvelous these days."

At this moment, Hal's cellphone rang.

It happened to be the subject of their conversation. The owner of an outstanding figure was calling.

"What's up, Juujouji?"

'Ah, Haruga-kun? President M has issued emergency summons. Hurry over now!'

Reportedly, President M was apparently on the clubs building's roof when breakfast was delivered.

Ignoring the arrival of Orihime and Hazumi, she kept her eyes closed and meditated for thirty minutes. Then without warning, she opened her eyes wide and emitted a mighty shout.

Emergency breakfast time followed immediately.

After finishing an entire rice cooker's worth of white rice, cooked from four cups of raw rice, President M said, "Get me everyone involved in my clubs! I shall show you the fruits of my training!"

Consequently, Hal and Asya rushed over in haste.

Under the gazes of four people including Hazumi and Orihime, President M slowly began to speak, "Two full days of training has led to my ascension to

a new realm. The way I am now, I feel that I can even oppose the Great Old Ones and phantasmal demons from the macrocosm's abyss..."

"A-Amazing..."

"Although it's worth pointing out that training duration was only two days..."

Ignoring the whispers between Hazumi and Orihime, President M shouted "Hah!" loudly.

Expecting a massive explosion, Hal entered a precautionary stance but surprisingly, nothing happened at all. On everyone's behalf, Asya asked skeptically, "...Are you trying to do something like a transformation?"

"Don't be ludicrous, it's not like I have some kind of hyperbolic whatever chamber. Two mere days of training won't amount to monumental changes. Nevertheless, I still achieved distinct results. Am I right, Haruga?"

Stared at by President M's round eyes, Hal could not help but feel a pang of fright.

"When I 'looked' at you last time, I could not see anything resembling a proper destiny. But as I am now, I might be able to see something. Would you like a try?"

"Uh, my destiny?"

"Indeed. The high-level skill of Life Consultant is an ultimate finishing move. Even a boy as irregular as you would surely beg me for life coaching out of admiration. You are welcome."

"Sure... Then I'll try it out."

The instant Hal made his request, President M leaned over without warning.

Her flowing steps were surprisingly agile, By the time he realized, the president had already struck Hal in the chest with her palm.

"Hah!"

"Uwah!?"

Hal's body was sent flying spectacularly by the sudden palm strike.

Then he fell on his bottom just like that. Meanwhile, President M gazed down at Hal aloofly and said with solemnity, "...Your guiding light has been in your hand since a long time ago. Please remember it when you find yourself cornered and unsure what to do..."

"I-In my hand?"

However, President M did not answer his question.

Her massive body, estimated to weigh 140kg approximately, swayed left and right before collapsing limply. The eccentric, whom Hal and the others ought to call their leader, remained lying on the floor like that.

"She fell asleep...?"

Regular breathing sounds could be heard from the president's mouth. Her eyes were closed.

Had she used up her energy? Next, Hal noticed that his chest was stinging dully even though it was just a light strike.

"As always, anything is possible with her..."

Watching the sleeping president, Hal felt impressed from the bottom of his heart. However, he totally could not comprehend the meaning of the advice she had just offered him—

Chapter 4 - Queen of the Arrow

Part 1

Four days had already elapsed since the dragons *occupied* Tokyo New Town.

During this period, Mutou Natsumi aka Mutou-san stayed at a shelter the whole time. That particular facility was originally a large community center located at Minamikasai in the Edogawa ward. As a venue for theater performances, orchestra concerts and the like, it was quite spacious.

"I really don't know when I'll be able to leave this place..."

At around 11am on the fourth day, Mutou-san murmured quietly to herself. She happened to be in the dining hall at the time, casually watching television.

For the past four days, all channels without exception were broadcasting special reports about "What on earth happened to Tokyo New Town?" The same went for this moment. There were roughly twenty other people watching the same program, paying various levels of attention. They were all residents from the neighborhood.

The male newscaster was summarizing information on television.

Content consisted of headlines such as "a dragon attack threatening human minds has rendered the majority of residents unconscious," "New Town residents are unable to escape," "citizens fortunate enough to be unaffected are living in shelters within New Town," "thoughts from various evacuees," "calling for all residents in Tokyo's outskirts to evacuate as quickly as possible" etc.

"But since phones and the internet are not blocked, at least information can still be exchanged..."

However, humans could not leave New Town to go "outside."

Since food and water were plentiful, living was not a problem as long as one ignored the dragons circling all over the place.

However, this situation was tantamount to torment with no end in sight.

Mutou-san sighed. Including her, evacuees who remained "unfrozen" had all dutifully accepted the current situation, living obediently in the shelter.

This was probably the incident had happened less than a week ago. Their stress had yet to build up seriously. Furthermore, there was the shocking video of dragons mercilessly killing people who were willfully escaping.

Sure enough, the reason was the intense impression the video left on people?

There were also rumors that the dragons flying in the air were monitoring the people who walked outside.

"Since there's nothing else to do anyway, I guess I'll do some volunteer work."

Due to the mental attack from the dragons, 90% of the citizens were "frozen."

In that state, they were being kept directly at the shelters where they were present when the dragons attacked. However, they were laid out like goods at spacious venues such as school gyms or the like, lying down packed together tightly, literally "kept"—

This task was still in progress. Volunteers were also being recruited with great gusto.

Most of the unaffected people like Mutou-san were participating, using the chance to secure a "slightly better bedspace" for their family and friends while they were at it.

But at this moment, her classmate Funaki-san walked over. She was also a resident in the neighborhood, which was why she was living in the same shelter as Mutou-san.

"Mutou-san! The handsome guy's fever finally subsided!"

"Oh, finally. Then let's go check on him."

Informed by Funaki-san, Mutou-san replied.

The silver-haired handsome young man had been carried into this elementary school gym four days earlier. Since then, his high fever had persisted, keeping him in a state of delirium. However, there were very few hospitals in normal operation because the majority of medical professionals had fallen unconscious.

A patient with no diseases or external injuries apart from a fever would not be allowed to be hospitalized, which ended up causing him to be sent here directly.

"Besides, he can basically speak now, although he doesn't really like to talk."

"Where is he from? He's probably not Japanese."

Passport, foreigner registration, wallet, credit card.

The mysterious and handsome man with none of these articles on his person was a silver-haired Caucasian. Ever since four days ago, Mutou-san had been curious about his identity.

"Well, he's been keeping a poker face the whole time. Let alone where he's from, he won't even reveal his name. But that's what makes him cool. Handsome guys have it so good."

Listening to her classmate's report, Mutou-san smiled wryly.

Funaki-san had been diligently checking on the "mysterious handsome guy" in this manner.

She had even applied cooling gel pads to his forehead and even prepared ice packs.

This sort of care was the result of plain hospitality and a fan girl mindset of wanting to look after a handsome man, combined with a situation lacking in entertainment. Mutou-san would occasionally go along with her too.

The pair made their way to a large Japanese-style room on the second floor of the community center.

This place seemed to be frequently used for flower arrangement and other classes offered by the community. Moving a futon over, they had turned it into a sickroom for the silver-haired man.

"Ah, you're trying to go out again!? You can't!"

Arriving in front of the Japanese-style room, Funaki-san suddenly yelled.

Leaning unsteadily against the wall for support, the mysterious silver-haired man was trying to leave the room.

"It's very dangerous outside and you can't leave Tokyo either. Haven't you heard?"

While Mutou-san was offering a honest advice, Funaki-san rushed over to support his body.

The silver-haired handsome man's expression darkened while he coldly tried to shove Funaki-san away, but all he could manage was bump against her shoulder. It looked like he could not exert any strength.

"See, you can't do anything with your body like this, right?"

"Although hiding is not my preference, it is still acceptable... But I absolutely cannot tolerate being sheltered by the likes of humans. This is a taint to my pride!"

Warned by Mutou-san, the handsome man argued back in fluent Japanese. Furthermore, his voice was extremely pleasant to the ear. Although Mutou-san felt as though she might have heard his voice somewhere recently, it was probably her imagination.

Next to her, Funaki-san commented emotionally, "This guy is too amazing. Even when he's just speaking, it feels like an acting performance."

"Because he's a foreigner after all. Cultural sensibilities are different."

It looked like they had picked up a weird man to care for.

For the first time, Mutou-san was struck by this fact.

Part 2

Hal and Asya arrived at the school's infirmary, taking one other person with them.

"Anyway, let her lie down here for now."

"Then I'm putting her down. Heave-ho!"

In one go, Asya unloaded the weight on her back to the bed Hal had indicated.

President M. After delivering the oracle at the cultural clubs building, this massive 140kg creature had suddenly fallen asleep. Using Muscle Enhancement magic to increase her physical strength, Asya had carried her here. Meanwhile, Hal followed along to assist from behind to maintain balance.

"Let's check on her two hours later."

After saying that, Hal left the infirmary with Asya.

Although they could return straight to the library, Hal motioned to his childhood friend with his eyes when they were passing the cafeteria. This alone was enough for Asya to understand.

"Do you have something to say?"

"Yeah, about Rushalka."

The two of them entered the cafeteria and bought milk coffee at the vending machine.

Then choosing a nearby table, they sat down face to face.

"I'll cut straight to the chase. Since Rushalka's birth ritual will be held in Hinokagutsuchi's absence, I hope you'll assist me by taking over her share."

"...Yes, after all, you took her heartmetal to use as a research sample."

As expected of Asya, her comprehension was instant. She immediately understood what Hal meant.

"You can't ask her for help as before?"

"I can't. So that's the situation."

"You could've completed the birth ritual first before making a move to secure the heartmetal, right?"

"But she's a seasoned warrior and exalted queen. I doubt she'd be deceived. And how should I put it? After all, she's..."

"After all, she saved your life, so you can't bring yourself to deceive her—Right?"

"No no no, I'm just slightly hesitant because I'm still indebted to her."

"Very well, I'll take your word for it."

"That's why I'm planning to have my gun preside over the ritual. As a partner who has entered into a covenant with me, Asya, you're also linked to that gun. Can you help me to check the ritual procedure?"

"Of course."

The two of them gulped down milk coffee while chatting casually. The ability to swiftly resolve business under this kind of ambiance was precisely the advantage of being stuck with an inseparable friendship.

Next, Asya closed her eyes after receiving the magic gun Hal summoned.

Giving up on words and language, she meditated, so as to facilitate comprehension of magical guidance through imagery.

"...I think I understand it mostly."

After roughly ten minutes, Asya finally opened her eyes and placed the magic gun on the table.

Then sighing, she reported, "The principles behind this ritual magic. Its intent. The technique's key points. Also, what happened during the past two rituals, recorded in the Rune of the Bow in your possession..."

"If the conditions are not fulfilled completely, chances of success seem to be very low, right?"

"Correct. It doesn't work unless a great deal of magical power is prepared in advance. And it must be similar to what's generated by those dragon heartmetals... Indeed, magical power heavily steeped in the attribute of fire."

"I knew it, so that's what's missing. Just as I suspected."

Because the two previous rituals were also conducted under conditions of frighteningly concentrated magical power.

Hal instantly took out the piece of red agate from his uniform's pocket. Hinokagutsuchi's heartmetal. Looking at its scarred surface, he whispered softly, "Juujouji had given birth to Akuro-Ou's body in one go back then, whereas Shirasaka was bringing about Minadzuki's rebirth together with her heartmetal. I'd like to revive Rushalka no matter what..."

"Yes, that's what I hope for too. But that being said—"

Asya suddenly changed the subject.

"Thanks to my link with that gun, the mystery is finally solved."

"Mystery?"

"Yes. It's the reason why you've steadfastly refused to give details about the birth ritual's procedure."

Hal jumped in fright in response to Asya's direct stare.

Speaking of which, he had completely forgotten to tell Asya about what he had done with Orihime, Hazumi and Hinokagutsuchi. Neither had he written it into the report!

Hal hastily returned the heartmetal to his pocket, coughed lightly and cleared his throat.

"I can't believe you cleverly deceived Orihime-san and Hazumi-san, making them undress to that extent, and even placed your paws on their tender skin... This behavior is virtually no different from that of a brutal and conniving little pervert. Obscene."

"No, it's supposed to be something like faith healing."

"A-And this time, you're even trying to do the same to me—!"

Spontaneously, Asya's face turned bright red and she glared at him viciously.

Hal muttered "eh?" to himself. Indeed, Asya had a point. Since a birth ritual was going to be held, he would have to subject Asya to the same treatment

as Orihime and Hazumi. However, he had completely failed to realize this the whole time. Why?

"Uh, umm, what can I say...?"

"I-I really don't get you, Haruomi. I originally thought you were 100% herbivorous, completely unaroused even when you have a lively young beauty like me by your side."

"W-Well, I am a healthy boy after all."

"Looks like that's definitely true. So that's why you're trying to make me a target of your lustful impulses... That's so indecent, so dirty."

"I-It's a long story. H-How can I explain it?"

From Hal's perspective, Asya was something like a blood sister.

Hal almost never saw her as a member of the opposite sex. Wasn't this precisely the reason why he had directly declared Rushalka's rebirth without anticipating this development to unfold naturally?

Just as he was about to spill the result of his impromptu self-analysis, Hal suddenly noticed.

He originally thought his childhood friend would surely feel anger and disgust at his lust.

"So perverted—I-I-It makes me unsure what to do."

But for some reason, Asya was staring at Hal with moistened eyes.

Somehow, he felt that there was no anger in her eyes. Instead, he could catch faint glimpses of reassurance and hesitation, as well as some kind of overjoyed emotion...

In addition, she even said with a bit of a dilemma, "B-But I'm slightly relieved. Before, I've always thought Haruomi was harboring a fatal flaw as a living creature, a boy who'd simply live a wasted life just like that..."

"Is that how far your imagination has gone...?"

"S-Since you're spending your days in frustration, secretly harboring irrepressible desires for me as a woman... In that case, I'll do everything I can to help you as your childhood friend..."

"Huh!?"

With her blush expanding from her face to her neck, Asya was speaking softly.

In that moment, while he was stunned by her words, the childhood friend's fairy-like countenance drew near Hal's face. Asya was a flawless beauty in appearance, after all. Hal could not help but feel his heart racing.

"I-I have a suggestion."

"S-Sure."

"Uh, umm... Ooooooooooh~~~~~!"

"W-What's wrong!? Asya!"

"I! I'm bound by duty to correct you, Haruomi, to prevent you from becoming a notorious pervert! And this is necessary for reviving Rushalka too... S-So, let's practice!"

"Practice!?"

"Y-Yes. Let's rehearse first for Rushalka's birth ritual!"

Asya suddenly sat down next to Hal.

"Come! Like what you did to Orihime-san and Hazumi-san, please ravage me with your bestial lust—I mean, please do the same thing as what you did during the ritual!"

"Ehhhh!?"

"I-If you don't have the guts, Haruomi, then I'll take the lead!"

Asya brought her fingers to her uniform—the buttons on her shirt—and prepared to unfasten them.

Despite her assertive words, her fingers moved very slowly. But even so, she still undid her buttons one by one.

Finally all unbuttoned, she then pulled her shirt hem out from her skirt—

The clothing covering Asya's upper body was parted left and right down the middle. From the gap, Hal could see skin as white as milk.

Naturally, Hal knew of her pale complexion. Nevertheless, he never imagined it would be to this extent—

Like white porcelain, her delicate skin was so beautiful that it was overwhelming. Furthermore, that narrow waist was also making his heart pound. All Hal needed to do was wrap his arms around her and Asya's slender waist would be drawn entirely into his embrace.

The little navel exuded shyness and cuteness. Also, looking upwards—

From the gap in the shirt, he could even catch a faint glimpse of the blue underwear covering her petite bust. At that very moment, Hal realized he had made a cognitive mistake.

Compared to Orihime, Asya's bust size was definitely inferior.

However, his silver-haired childhood friend was very svelte after all.

Yet in spite of that, her chest, hips and buttocks were somewhat fleshy, tracing out unexpected curves—

Petite though it may be, this well-proportioned figure was full of feminine charm.

Hal gulped down a gasp. As though reaching perfection through a maiden's form directly, this body was definitely equipped with a fairy's dangerous charm.

"S-So, Haruomi, please put your hand here..."

"Ehhh!?"

Asya took Hal's right hand and moved it to the surface of her abdomen.

Although Hal was greatly surprised by the tender smoothness of the pale skin, he immediately realized. Conducting a birth ritual necessitated touching the abdomen of the witch who served as the medium. This was a dry run.

Using his right palm where the Rune of the Bow resided, Hal stroked that delicate abdomen.

Such a slender waist might perhaps elicit jealous sighs from fellow ladies. Was it really okay to entrust the heartmetal of "serpent" to such a thin and frail body?

Despite his worries, Hal still kept stroking Asya's belly, allowing his fingertips and palm to wander all over the place.

"Mm... Mmmmmm—"

Suddenly, Asya showed a painful expression. Clearly, he had not done anything violent, right?

"W-What's the matter?"

"I don't know if I should say it's tickling... or a bit embarrassing..."

Asya was evidently suffering—No, Hal noticed.



Instead of pain, she was enduring the faint ticklish feeling caused by skin contact.

Perhaps his childhood friend was very sensitive to this sort of tactile contact. However, Asya did not try to escape from Hal's right hand despite feeling ticklish.

Not only that, she partially closed her eyes as though feeling pleasure, allowing Hal to do as he pleased.

"It feels so warm... So comfortable."

Probably due to the continuous rubbing, Asya's abdomen heated up.

Hal had felt a cold sensation initially. Realizing this was because female body temperatures were lower than male's, he secretly nodded to himself.

"Mm—Guh... Mmmm."

Asya made another expression of endurance. It looked surprisingly seductive.

Hal was confident that he knew everything to know about his childhood friend. However, to think there were this many facial expressions to see for the first time and things to learn for the first time—Hal's heart kept pounding furiously.

Soon after, Asya whispered, "U-Umm, over here... Do you want to practice a bit too?"

"Huh?"

"I-If the procedure is the same as for Hazumi-san, then you need to extract Rushalka's heartmetal through my heart... In that case, you need to touch this part too—!"

Hal recalled the ritual last time.

Indeed, so-called touching the heart—Hal could not help but look up and meet Asya's gaze. With moistened eyes, his childhood friend nodded.

Then taking Hal's hand again, she moved it over to her breast.

Hal's right hand finally reached the body part clad in the blue underwear. Petite yet soft, there was a comfortable sense of elasticity. More importantly, it could be held in one's palm like a lovely little flower from the wild. This stunned and moved Hal as though he had been electrically shocked.

Just as the beating in his heart reached its highest point...

Hal and Asya both jumped in surprise at the same time. This was due to a sudden surge in magical power.

Furthermore, it was coming from Haruga Haruomi's heart, when clearly magical power could only be generated in the human realm from a witch's heart or the Clockwork Mage!

"What is going on here...?"

"Did practicing the ritual with me trigger an awakening...?"

Perplexed, Hal muttered together with Asya.

Bit by bit, the magical power was flowing out endlessly like from an inexhaustible spring.

"S-Seems like a lot more will flow out... Magical power rich in the fire attribute—It's almost like it were generated from a dragon's heartmetal..."

After saying these words quietly in amazement, Asya suddenly fell into deep thought.

Furthermore, Hal also thought back earlier. Just now, President M had struck his chest lightly. Wasn't that location right above the heart? The president's oracle flashed through his mind.

'Your guiding light has been in your hand since a long time ago...'

So long as they had this magical power generated from the heart, perhaps—

"What the birth ritual lacks is a great volume of magical power..."

"Haruomi! Let's revive Rushalka right away!"

Hal's right palm immediately began to heat up. The Rune of the Bow surfaced.

Thump. Thump. Thump. The dragonslaying rune was throbbing in his hand like a heart's pulsation, hot and powerful.

This heat was alerting Hal. The rune paired with the bow had arrived.

"Asya, hurry and tell everyone to hide! She's here!"

"She? Who do you mean?"

"Last time's dragon king...! The one that looks like a girl!"

Grabbing his magic gun from the table, Hal rushed outside.

—In order to receive the dragon king, Princess Yukikaze.

Part 3

Hal was heading to the sports ground on campus.

This was because he believed that a wide-open place would be better. That way, even if anything unexpected happened—even if a dragon king went on a rampage—damage could be minimized.

Standing in the center of the field where the baseball team frequently practiced, Hal looked up into the sky.

It was quite sunny today. Isolated white clouds were scattered across the clear blue sky. However, something was tearing through this beautiful contrast.

A flash of white, flying from the far end of the sky.

In merely ten-odd seconds after Hal confirmed with the naked eye, the flying flash of light arrived in the air above the school. Seemingly lightning speed, it was supersonic flight.

"The queen finally arrives..."

What had only appeared to be a flash of light moments earlier was landing at Hal's sports ground.

Clad in a white one-piece dress, the girl was standing sternly on her surfboard of a "wand." She was the dragon king whom Hal had witnessed offshore of Haneda three days earlier, Princess Yukikaze.

The "wand" carrying the princess descended before Hal's eyes, hovering motionlessly in the air.

"What a face, totally lacking in ambition..."

The white dragon king was the first to murmur poignantly.

"Hearing that the human who inherited the bow was here, I came here to pay a special visit. Forgive me for the delay since our last encounter. I went on a tour to look around because it's been a long time since I last visited this country."

Despite the haughty attitude, her tone of voice was quite relaxed and cute.

"By the way, your face—Neither dignified nor manly at all. But taking an alternative viewpoint, it could be described as 'an interesting face.' Yes."

"Thanks for the praise..."

Princess Yukikaze was gazing down, examining Hal as though appraising him.

Never expecting her to judge his appearance, Hal squirmed with displeasure.

"Not at all, no need for gratitude. A man's caliber cannot be judged from appearance. I, Yukikaze, am not a bumbling ruler who fails to understand such a principle. However, it's true that there's no harm in comporting oneself with greater poise."

"If it's about my appearance, I hope you'll complain directly to my parents instead."

Hal never expected to be conversing with a dragon king like this one day.

The situation was supposed to be terrifying, but Hal felt rather composed.

The fall from a great height last time, equivalent to jumping off the top of a high-rise building, as well as the experience of fighting a giant dragon head on must have affected him greatly. Both his body and mind were gradually growing accustomed to shocking incidents.

Meanwhile, the dragon king who looked like a girl answered cheerfully.

"What are you talking about? Although appearances are inborn, one's demeanor will convey the owner's mind and way of life. Don't blame your parents, clumsy brat."

"I see. Perhaps you're right."

"Yes. By the way, your face does not look like a warrior's, no matter what."

The "wand" carrying the princess was hovering roughly three meters above the ground.

Whether physically or mentally, the "lofty" girl scoffed with a chuckle.

"However, I heard of your splendid victory against a warrior whom I, Yukikaze, had approved—That silver dragon. Fufu, after learning of this illustrious battle achievement, I find your silly facial expression even more amusing. There's an air of nonchalance."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not a piece of tea ware or antique..."

"Hmm, are you referring to the tea ceremony? You know of that art too? Very well, I, Yukikaze, shall serve you tea in the future. However, it also rests upon you surviving until then."

The princess responded to Hal's throwaway comment in this manner, prompting him to stare wide-eyed.

"Can I ask where exactly did you learn about the tea ceremony?"

Unlike Hinokagutsuchi, the way Princess Yukikaze spoke and acted seemed quite young.

Hence, Hal deliberately used the "kimi" form of second person reference to address her. Although he had no idea how many centuries she had lived as dragon, her mental age felt similar to his.

"A long long time ago. I don't remember much but it should be when I last visited this nation of Japan. Back then, the people's clothing and buildings were totally different from now."

In that case, she must have toured Japan back in the Edo or Warring States periods!

Hal thought swiftly. The super ancient creatures known as dragons had returned to earth at the end of the twentieth century, most likely after an absence of two or three thousand years. That was why it was called the "return of the dragons."

Prior to their return, the dragons were supposed to have slept deep under the sea beyond the reach of humans.

However, the battle where Hinokagutsuchi cast away her heartmetal had taken place roughly eight centuries ago. Furthermore, Princess Yukikaze had witnessed early modern Japanese culture and even learned the tea ceremony.

"Both you... and the Crimson Queen have a long history with humans."

Facing the beautiful maiden of pure white, Hal said softly, "Taking human form to go traveling around the world, sometimes worshiped as a goddess by humans—I'm starting to feel interested in how you dragon kings have lived for the past two thousand years. At least, you don't enter hibernation like the other dragons, right?"

"That goes without saying. We dragon kings sleep whenever we want to sleep, getting up whenever it suits us. There are also dragon kings who establish their territory underground or at the bottom of the sea, happily partaking in the pleasures of a nap—"

Princess Yukikaze answered proudly in a quiet voice then pointed straight at the sky.

"However, that's not my style. The wind is something that flows in the air, isn't it? From the start, I, Yukikaze, have spread my wings to ride the wind and soar across the distant sky. Flying past the moon and the red planet, I reached the ocean of stars. Occasionally, I returned to earth... But the majority of my journeys all took place in the ocean of stars."

Listening the princess' casual explanation, Hal sighed.

Speaking of which, dragons were capable of breaking past the atmosphere nonchalantly, establishing colonies on satellite orbits or the moon. The "ocean of stars" was apparently what they called the universe.

If one became a dragon king, would going on one or two space journeys be a matter of fact too—?

"Fufu, I'm seeing a fresh expression on your face, bow user."

Due to the princess smiling suddenly and commenting, Hal could not help but exclaim "Eh?"

"It looks like you have exercised your mind much during this short duration. That silly face of yours has taken on some measure of a sage's appearance. I see, so that's the kind of person you are."

"I'm nowhere worthy of being called a sage. And this is the first time anyone has said something like that to me."

"People will say this eventually. I, Yukikaze, guarantee it."

After asserting that, the princess smirked.

"Seeing that you are this knowledgeable, I will ask you this. Different from you, the silver dragon that inherited the Rune of the Sword is a warrior whom I, Yukikaze, approved. Even among the dragons, he is a most excellent hero."

The elite dragon, Pavel Galad. Successor of the Rune of the Sword.

Hearing Yukikaze bring up the dragon he wanted to find the most, Hal jumped in surprise.

"Compare yourself to him. In what area do you think you've surpassed him?"

"Not even a single one. I won last time simply because my comrades are stronger... However, I believe he deserved to lose."

"Oh?"

Using this excellent opportunity, Hal intentionally asserted an unnecessary claim.

Because he wanted to see how an incumbent dragon king would react to his viewpoint.

"Even if he hadn't lost to us, in the process of following this Road to Kingship game, he'll surely meet defeat and setback somewhere. He... I don't

know if I should call him too brave? As a beginner in that game, he overdid things in my opinion."

"Ha, hahahaha!"

After hearing Hal's view, Princess Yukikaze laughed heartily.

"Impressive, bow user! I never expected something like that from you! However—Fufu, I definitely agree with part of what you said."

Seeing the maiden dragon king express agreement, Hal jumped in surprise.

This meant that Hal's impression of the monumental trial known as the Road to Kingship was not incorrect. But in the next instant, Hal trembled all over in terror.

Because Princess Yukikaze scoffed with a conceited smile while glaring sharply at him.

"Isn't it time for you to introduce yourself?"

"My name is... Haruga Haruomi."

"Very well, whatever Haruomi. Your intelligence is definitely amusing. However, it is all in vain unless you possess valor matching your intelligence. Next up, show me your martial prowess and valor."

Carrying the princess who was standing sternly, the surfboard "wand" slowly ascended.

"Naturally, as a dragon king, I, Yukikaze, surpass you greatly in martial prowess! Nevertheless, Haruomi, I shall test you to see if you have the caliber to overcome this trial!"

"Huh!?"

"Fufu, you could try your best to escape. I, Yukikaze, shall turn into the dragonslaying arrow that pierces all prey, chasing after you relentlessly!"

"I-I can't possibly dodge an arrow flying at Mach speed!"

As one might expect, developments unfolded in this manner—Without even time for grumbling, Hal immediately summoned his "wand" too.

A magic gun of steel and gold. The weapon from materializing the Rune of the Bow. Then without hesitation, Hal selected his firing mode. Click, click.

Accompanied by two operating sounds, the magic gun adjusted to fully automatic fire.

"I'm counting on you!"

Hal pulled the trigger, causing thirty bullets of red light to fire continuously from the muzzle.

This was a technique of assured annihilation, instantly depleting all bullets in the magazine. Since triple bursts were ineffective against the princess' minion, his only choice against the master was an even stronger trump card. Nevertheless, Hal still harbored doubts secretly.

Unless he used his most powerful attack, perhaps he might not even achieve a restraining effect?

Believing his worries while firing continuously was probably the right decision. However—

"Hahahahaha! Excellent, Haruomi. This vicious vigor is exactly to my liking!"

The maiden dragon king's method of defense was unexpected.

When the thirty bullets of red light approached, the surfboard "wand" carrying her instantly accelerated.

Then turning into a flash of white light, it rapidly ascended the vast blue sky that was adorned by scattered white clouds.

The princess gradually increased her lead over the thirty bullets of light.

"She doesn't even need to turn back into a dragon huh... Chase faster!"

At Hal's orders, the thirty bullets of light chasing Princess Yukikaze all sped up in order to pursue and pierce the target that had accelerated first.

"Ha! Trying to match me in flying skills, are you!?"

The princess laughed in apparent joy in the air. Then her "wand" changed trajectory.

Previously, it had been flying straight through the sky, but now, it suddenly made a U-turn and doubled back towards the ground.

Also, it seemed like—She was charging headlong into the thirty bullets of light aimed at her.

Naturally, the princess would be mercilessly riddled with holes in a head-on collision with fully automatic fire of assured annihilation. However, she managed to dodge them. Hal could not help but feel stunned by surprise.

"I-Is this possible?"

Using aerial mobility with skill, the princess had completely dodged the approaching rain of thirty bullets.

As though controlling a flying surfboard, she moved between the bullets, making minor adjustments in position with sudden lefts, rights, ups and downs, evading every attack.

However, the thirty bullets of light truly lived up to the name of assured annihilation.

Even after missing their target, the bullets immediately changed directions to attack the princess again. Nevertheless, the princess and the magic surfboard dodged them repeatedly.

"Hahahahaha! You have much to learn, Haruomi!"

Repeatedly dodging the rain of annihilation bullets, the princess was like a surfer riding on wind and waves.

Her soaring form was refined and elegant. Laughing cheerfully, her beautiful face was filled with child-like airs as though frolicking between ocean waves.

However, two beasts suddenly appeared, interrupting her enjoyment.

"Akuro-Ou! Attack with fire magic—You must use a finishing move!"

"Rushalka! Invoke the rune and pseudo-divinity simultaneously, full burst!"

The white nine-tailed fox-wolf, Akuro-Ou.

The crumbling wyvern with wounds all over, Blue Rushalka.

Two leviathans materialized in a pincer attack to catch Princess Yukikaze while she was surfing in the air.

Furthermore, each leviathan was accompanied by multiple flying "arrowheads." Like Hal's magic gun, they were weapons materialized from the Rune of the Bow.

The nine black arrowheads led by Akuro-Ou shot explosive flame from their tips.

The fourteen white arrowheads led by Rushalka shot freezing wind from their tips.

Fully automatic fire combined with a leviathan's pseudo-divinity, this was a technique of assured annihilation. As a result, the sky above the school turned into a storm zone covered by flames, hot air, ice shards and freezing wind.

"Hmm—Reinforcements!?"

Caught by surprise before she could dodge, Princess Yukikaze was swallowed by the swirling vortex of flame and freezing air.

This was because she had focused wholly on Hal and the magic gun, only noticing the ambush a step too late.

"As expected of Asya and Juujouji..."

If one were to launch a surprise attack, this would be the only opportunity.

His childhood friend had probably spearheaded this initiative. As her follower, Juujouji was also very courageous. Furthermore, Hal could hear other voices.

"Senpai! We're over here!"

"Harry! It's time to conclude the diversionary task!"

Taking a closer look, he saw Hazumi and Luna Francois arriving at the side of the sports ground.

Presumably they had been observing the entire process while hiding earlier. Asya and Orihime were also next to them, worriedly watching their partners in the sky.

While rushing towards the girls, Hal also glanced at Rushalka.

Particles of light kept falling from all over Rushalka's body. This summoning could very well be her last time to materialize. Rushalka's physical body was reaching its limit.

Even so, the blue wyvern still hung on to invoke the Rune of the Bow.

However, just as Hal reached the witches—

"I hereby decree to my emblem, the Arrow of Sirius..."

Listening to the voice descending from the sky, Hal instantly shouted loudly, "Asya, Juujouji! Make your 'serpents' disappear. Otherwise, it'll be too late!"

"I, Yukikaze—will now transform into the dragonslaying arrow!"

The white dragon king had invoked the incantation for a technique of assured annihilation. Hal had heard this mantra many times in his dreams.

The instant her voice resounded in all directions, an orb releasing pure white lightning manifested in the air above the swirling vortex of explosive flame and freezing air.

Riding the magic surfboard, Princess Yukikaze was standing sternly in the center of the light.

Completely unscathed as though it was matter-of-fact, she also showed quite a delighted smile.

"Although in sloppy manner, you went out of your way to use a trump card, after all. In that case, manners dictate that I must respond with an equally worthy technique. O imitations, pay attention and take on the dragonslaying arrow!"

"Rushalka, emergency dispel of material form!"

"A-Akuro-Ou, same for you! Please hurry and—!"

The instant the witches yelled, the princess and the surfboard flew, shrouded in lightning.

The pure-white lightning traced out two lines in the air.

The first line ran from Princess Yukikaze's hovering position to Rushalka's chest while the other line went towards Akuro-Ou's chest, resulting in V-shaped symbol.

Immediately, the raging storm of fire and ice in the air was completely dispelled.

Deep wounds were inflicted on Rushalka and Akuro-Ou's chests. Scorched black, the wounds exhibited the shape of an oval enclosed inside a slender isosceles triangle—Hal recognized it on sight.

That emblem was precisely the Rune of the Arrow!

In addition, after being struck by the dragonslaying arrow's attack, the two leviathans gradually turned black, starting from extremities such as the tips of feet or wings. Parts that turned black were immediately weathered away.

Probably thanks to the earlier orders for them to "disappear"...

Before the blackening weathering effect could spread to their torsos, Rushalka and Akuro-Ou vanished.

They had released their material forms in the nick of time, thus avoiding fatal injuries. However, pure-white lightning proceeded to descend towards Hal's group from overhead.

This was to strike the true target, Haruga Haruomi. Hal immediately commanded his magic gun.

"Deploy protection!"

The pearly light enveloped Hal and the four witches next to him.

At that moment, pure-white lightning—the dragonslaying arrow—struck them.

Part 4

In a violent collision, the dragonslaying arrow finally struck the imperishable protection guarding Hal and his friends.

In that instant, the erupting lightning lit up the sports ground and the surroundings as though it was daytime, meanwhile producing explosive wind and an intense shockwave.

Hal had withstood Galad's technique of assured annihilation before, the "thunder god's sword." This attack was many times stronger than that.

However, the imperishable protection was able to defend Hal's group well. Although everyone inside the pearly light lost balance and fell on the ground due to the severe impact, they did not suffer anything worse than bruises or concussions.

But just like that time against Galad, Haruga Haruomi's heart stopped again.

Hal collapsed on the ground, his body limp and immobilized. His consciousness was also hazy, gathering only a weak sense of the surroundings.

"Hmm... Only this much martial prowess and valor. I'm a bit disappointed."

Riding the surfboard "wand," the princess descended near the ground again. Bored, the white dragon king stared at the unconscious Hal.

"In that case, it can't be helped. I'll hurry up and end everything with a beheading..."

"I-I won't let you do that!"

Listening to Princess Yukikaze's murmuring, Hazumi yelled out, unbelievably.

She was still lying on the ground, perhaps unable to stand after getting hit by the earlier shockwave. But even so, she still mustered all her strength to sit up.

"Please, Minadzuki... Save Senpai!"

"O priestess, please do not make such an unreasonable demand."

Looking up at the emerald serpentine dragon leviathan materializing in the air above the school, Princess Yukikaze said quietly in pity.

"Even an imitation goddess has no choice but to bow down in submission before a dragon king—O goddess, you have done enough. Take a break."

"Ah..."

Hearing that voice which could even be described as gentle, Hazumi could not find words to speak.

After appearing once in the air, Minadzuki immediately vanished, her massive emerald body disappearing within the blink of an eye. This was due to dispelling her material form.

Princess Yukikaze was wielding stronger control over a "serpent" than the partner she was actually contracted to—

A dragon king's authority was undoubtedly horrifying. Although Hal already knew this before the battle, the massive gap in power was huge, to the point of despairing. No matter how he thought about it, there was no chance of winning.

He looked around him, only to see Orihime currently lying on the ground. She looked like she had lost consciousness. Or perhaps, she was suffering from a concussion.

In contrast, Luna Francois and Asya were trying to get up, albeit stiffly. They looked like they had only suffered bruises, probably because they had deployed defensive magic to protect themselves momentarily.

The American witch sighed with a troubled expression.

But even so, Luna Francois still prepared herself a weapon. From under her skirt, she took out a 9mm semi-automatic pistol. Apparently, she kept the holster strapped to her thigh.

Meanwhile—

Despite heavy injuries, Asya still looked at Princess Yukikaze with eyes of unwavering fighting spirit.

She had not given up hope on seeking victory... Or rather. Hal understood. Asya had already banished all notion of winning and losing, instead putting her determination into fighting their way out of this severe predicament.

At this rate, perhaps they might be able to find a way to survive.

Hal—or more precisely, Hal's consciousness—sighed.

"But that's all we could do. After all, we had no chance of winning from the start."

Modern humans were stuck in quite a despairing situation.

Although the media and the governments of various countries had put in touching amounts of effort to hide this fact, so long as the dragon kings and

elite dragons exerted themselves seriously, humanity as a race could very well go extinct within two years.

The dragons had not done so only because they were the ones doing the hunting and exploiting.

It was advantageous for them to allow their targets, the humans, to survive. Coexisting with such unfriendly neighbors, humanity had no choice but to struggle desperately.

Hal mentally committed his resolve. Rushalka must undergo rebirth.

However, even the grand combination of a dragonslaying rune with top-class leviathans had ended up disappointingly ineffective before a dragon king. He needed a little something extra as a trump card...

"I've got no choice but to resolve myself."

"Resolve, is that it...?"

Just as Hal was muttering to himself, Hinokagutsuchi's voice responded.

"Have you resolved yourself to coexist with the dragonslaying bow, to advance along the Road to Kingship?"

"No, I've simply resolved myself to feign participation in that ridiculous game with the ostentatious name, meanwhile devoting myself to researching secret techniques and clever ways to exploit loopholes in the system."

By the time he knew it, Hal's consciousness had fallen into dense mist, obscuring the surrounding scenery completely.

Princess Yukikaze and his companions had vanished too. However, the young girl in the scarlet kimono, Hinokagutsuchi, was nearby.

This was because the former queen of dragons had now invaded Hal's consciousness.

"Hmph. You are uttering bizarre things as usual."

"Say, the more I understand the situation, the more I've become convinced of this... From an RPG perspective, that Road to Kingship has really piss-poor balance. If you dutifully resolve matters in sequence, you'll surely die somewhere in the early or middle stages, right?"

Hal glared viciously at Hinokagutsuchi while he spoke.

This was an exchange between minds. If one were to calculate the actual duration in physical terms, one or two seconds probably elapsed at most.

Hence, they were able to converse like this while disregarding what was happening "outside the mist."

Guided by the magic gun—his "magic wand"—Hal understood this as well.

"Judging from Galad's and my strength, it seems like we're at a level where we could still get taken out by elite dragons no matter how much we rack our brains, right? Like running into a dragon king this time where the enemy is insanely strong. It's impossible to beat the boss no matter how I think about it."

"Fufu. Disregarding this while aiming to become "king" is precisely what it means to be a dragon."

"Unfortunately, I'm a human."

Hal grumbled at the snickering Hinokagutsuchi.

However, the man in black, Sophocles, had given out the biggest hint. There were indifferent participants who had unintentionally become dragon kings.

In other words, didn't that stand as evidence that making a serious attempt would be a shortcut to death?

"That elite named Galad really should rein in his hot-blooded fervor. He clearly understands better than me what the game is about, so why does he still want to take the challenge head on like a hero...?"

"That is because he is capable to begin with. According to your theory—"

Hinokagutsuchi's face revealed a diabolical smile that suited her extremely well.

"His caliber probably allows him to survive until the midgame. So long as his luck holds out."

"Then it's even more impossible for someone like me. I knew it, taking the secret techniques route is my only choice."

Hal looked up at the sky. Then he recalled the matter of the red agate.

At that moment, the divine treasure that was formerly Hinokagutsuchi's heartmetal appeared in the right hand of Hal's conscious entity. As expected of the mental world, things could be conjured by imagination alone. How convenient.

"Sorry, but I'm going to use this thing now."

This was the only thing he could use as the ace up his sleeve. Hal declared firmly, "As the representative of weak humans, I'm got no choice but to

become the proverbial fox that borrows the tiger's—or rather, the dragon's—clout."

"So this is your intention after all."

Hinokagutsuchi shrugged haughtily.

"Because you saw 'my past self'..."

"It suddenly occurred to me when I was making detailed inquiries to my gun about whether the birth ritual could be held without you. What would happen if I tried to use this to conduct the ritual?"

It had been half a month since he had obtained this "magic wand" of a magic gun.

Although this tool included many uses including combat and ability control, what Hal held in greatest regard was actually its function as a "guide to the unorthodox path." Thanks to that, he found the space to ponder secret techniques.

The likes of Pavel Galad probably would never think of this.

But as a weak human, Hal had no choice but to ponder how to survive beyond today.

"But even if the ritual were to succeed... Will you be able to command the 'queen'? That red heartmetal remains intimately linked to my soul—the soul of the former sovereign."

"....."

She had a point. Hal silently nodded.

This could be foreseen based on the fact that after he obtained the rune, Hinokagutsuchi had immediately resurrected *that* in the ruins of Tokyo Station—a place where her heartmetal was not at hand.

"If I were to interfere... What would you do?"

"It's already a gamble. But no matter how stacked the odds are against me, my only choice is to keep gambling," Hal replied while looking straight at the ghost of the former dragon king.

If that situation were to arise, they would probably need to confront Hinokagutsuchi before facing off against Princess Yukikaze. He must exhaust the limits of his wits and magical power and use every means possible to stop the self-styled devil from interfering.

"Then go ahead and try."

Hinokagutsuchi responded with something like a taunt. However, she was smiling.

This was not her usual smile of arrogance. Rather it seemed like the expression of a sacred guardian, watching from up high while powerless humans struggled in desperation. It was a smile belonging to a goddess with a young girl's appearance.

"I already know that you are craftier than I can imagine. Show me your caliber by taking action next!"

Hal nodded and gripped the heartmetal of red agate harder.

At the same time, he focused more attention on his own heart. Magical power began to pour from his heart like flames, spilling out of his body. Furthermore, it seemed endless like an eternal spring.

The intense magical power was in no way inferior to what was present at Akuro-Ou and Minadzuki's births.

Under such conditions, platinum-colored flames surrounded the heartmetal in his hand.

"Please, use this... use Hinokagutsuchi's heartmetal—to perform the birth ritual!"

Hal instructed the Rune of the Bow residing in his right palm as well as its manifestation, the magic gun.

Indeed—He had considered this before. By putting her heartmetal through rebirth, Minadzuki's physical body was also resurrected. In that case, what if he did the same thing using Hinokagutsuchi's heartmetal?

Back then, Akuro-Ou and Minadzuki had borrowed the wombs of witches to undergo birth.

But as a man, Haruga Haruomi did not have the ability to conceive and bear a child. Then what could he use as a substitute?

Taking the heartmetal that was burning with platinum flames, Hal pressed it hard against his own chest.

The objective was to merge it with Haruga Haruomi's heart.

Without any resistance, the heartmetal entered his chest swiftly.

Indeed. Since he was unable to give birth to life, his only recourse was to share out his own life!

Hal's heart absorbed Hinokagutsuchi's deceased heartmetal. Furthermore, it began to beat anew. At the same time, blood, life and magical power flowed into the dead heartmetal.

This also meant that Hal's body was starting to meld with Hinokagutsuchi's remains.

The living heart and the dead heartmetal merged into one, resulting in a transformative rebirth of new life—

Hal literally experienced the miracle occurring in his body. At the same time, he also tasted excruciating agony. Perhaps this was the so-called pain of childbirth when a baby was pushed out of its mother's body.

this pain caused Hal to scream as loud as he could.

"Uwahh
hh
hh!"

Hal did not know how long his pain lasted.

This was inside his mind, where the passage of time differed from that in the real world. Regardless, Hal's heart and Hinokagutsuchi's heartmetal were slowly taking on a new form, turning into one life.

Thump. This was the beating of the new heart, and equivalently, heartmetal. Next, the surrounding mist suddenly dispersed, because Hal had recovered consciousness.

By the time he regained his senses, Hal found himself lying on the school sports ground.

Orihime and Hazumi were lying collapsed nearby. Asya and Luna Francois had forced themselves on their feet in preparation to fight. Their gazes were directed towards Princess Yukikaze.

Riding the surfboard "wand," she was hovering above ground at a height of roughly four meters.

"Luna! Buy me a bit of time no matter how little!"

Despite getting up quite stiffly, Hal still yelled as hard as he could.

His body still could not move in full accordance with his will. But he had no choice but to say those words. Next, the witch carrying the 9mm semi-automatic pistol responded just as he predicted.

"Affirmative! Glinda, Invisible Walk!"

Luna Francois released astounding magical power from her entire body.

A witch's heart could not possibly generate magical power of this magnitude. It was almost as great as the magical power released when a "serpent" activated pseudo-divinity.

Clearly, her partner, Glinda the Good Witch of the South had yet to materialize!

"Gravity Cannon!"

Luna Francois called out while invoking the pseudo-divinity of Gravity.

After pouring in magic for gravity manipulation, Luna fired her pistol consecutively. Instead of 9mm Parabellum bullets, spheres resembling concentrated darkness were fired from the gun's muzzle.

Numbering seven in total, the dark spheres all flew towards Princess Yukikaze in the air.

"Hmm—!"

Pearly radiance manifested around the princess in the white dress.

Imperishable protection. Almost at the same time as the appearance of the light, the seven spheres fired by Luna—magic bullets for compressing targets through gravity control, thereby crushing them—arrived en masse.

However, even as many as seven shots of gravity bullets still could not crush imperishable protection, simply squeezing the pearly defensive field.

However, Princess Yukikaze frowned from behind her power of protection. She probably found it incredible for a witch to suddenly use pseudo-divinity.

Then the princess glared sharply behind Luna and Hal's group.

"Hiding over there, are you...? Show yourself."

At the dragon king's command, the gigantic body of a "serpent" instantly appeared in the school sports ground.

It was a fierce lion with orange fur. However, there was also a green dragon head on her right shoulder and a black goat head on her left—

Naturally, she was Glinda the Good Witch of the South.

By using the Invisible Walk command, master mage Luna Francois had summoned her partner while maintaining invisibility.

Secretly, she had used Glinda's second pseudo-divinity, Illusion.

This was probably a trick she thought up after witnessing Hazumi's failure. Nothing less expected from the abilities of someone certified as master-class.

"No need to hide yourself anymore, Glinda, go all-out—Gravity Wall!"

Ruooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!

The lion, dragon and black goat heads all roared simultaneously from behind Hal and company.

Hence, four black magic circles—each roughly Glinda's size—suddenly appeared above, before, behind and below the maiden dragon king who was standing in midair, applying pressure from four directions.

The four magic circles were precisely walls of gravity for crushing Princess Yukikaze!

Apart from that, the seven gravity bullets released earlier also applied pressure on the princess at full force.

Nevertheless, none of these deadly sources of gravity were able to touch Princess Yukikaze.

"Now that I know the method, it's nothing to be concerned about. Disappear."

While shielding herself with imperishable protection, the princess casually issued the order.

In that instant, Glinda's massive body, the seven gravity bullets and the four black magic circles all instantly vanished without trace matter-of-factly.

Even a Level 5 master-class witch could not prevail against a dragon king's authority.

However, Luna Francois had succeeded in stalling for a minute or two. This duration was as precious as gemstones. Back when the gravity bullets were fired, Hal was already taking action.

Hal focused his awareness on his heart—or rather, the heartmetal.

Abundant magical power instantly surged from his heart and began to fill up the school sports ground.

Thus, the *conditions* were fulfilled. Next, Asya looked at Hal.

From the moment Hal had spoken, his childhood friend had been like this. She instantly rushed to him, but not to celebrate each other's safety.

During the practice ritual earlier, their minds intents had already become one.

"Haruomi! Rushalka and I are ready any time!"

"Thanks, Asya!"

Asya arrived behind him and Hal reached his right hand into her chest.

Instead of grabbing her petite breast, his hand was sucked into his childhood friend's body to grab her strong and vigorous little heart. In that instant, as a mysterious effect of birth magic, the interior of Asya's body became linked to that of her partner Rushalka's.

At the same time, Asya's heart was switched with Rushalka's heartmetal.

Holding the heartmetal, Hal moved it downwards towards his childhood friend's lower abdomen.

"Mm... Mm, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Asya could not help but scream loudly. It was probably quite painful.

Since Orihime and Hazumi had experienced overwhelming pain in the past, the ritual needed to be conducted with utmost care. However, there was no time now. He had to swiftly and urgently finish everything.

"I'm okay... So hurry...!"

Tearful from the pain, Asya panted while she spoke.

Using human birth as an analogy, this situation would be akin to an emergency Caesarean surgical operation. Although Hal seemed to hesitate out of consideration for his suffering childhood friend—He must not stop now.

Instead, Hal used his free hand, his left, to hold Asya's left hand.

Asya gripped his hand tightly as though seeking help, to the point of hurting him.

Then in the next instant...

"Ahhh!"

The instant he drew his hand out of her body, Asya screamed loudly.

Instantly, she collapsed, utterly drained. After all, the ritual was extremely harsh despite its short length. Sitting limply on the ground, exhausted, his childhood friend's shoulders shook while she panted heavily.

However, her eyes were staring proudly at the object held in Hal's right hand.

A blue sphere—the heartmetal of the reborn Rushalka.

Burning inside was a tiny flame.

Leaving Hal's hand, the heartmetal floated into the air on its own.

At this moment, Princess Yukikaze had just eliminated Glinda from the sports ground. As though taking her spot in line, the blue heartmetal showed up and ascended towards the sky.

With flame residing inside it, Rushalka's heartmetal was glowing with dazzling radiance in the air.

This light turned into a wyvern's strong and massive body. The wings sprouting from the two shoulders were long and majestic, the head was adorned by a blue mane, while a long horn protruded from the forehead—

The wyvern with a single horn like a unicorn's, Blue Rushalka.

Finally, she was reborn in a perfect state of health. However—

"The imitation from earlier? Although it looks slightly more lively, it's ultimately still a loser. You'll only repeat the same mistake, you know?"

Standing on the flying surfboard, the dragon king spoke with boredom.

Of course, Hal understood her logic. Rushalka and Akuro-Ou were both vassals of dragonslaying power, which prevented them from submitting even if the princess commanded. However, that was all as far as differences went.

There was an unbridgeable gulf between a dragon king and "imitation dragons."

Nevertheless, Haruga Haruomi's heart had now absorbed a former dragon king's heartmetal—Hinokagutsuchi's. Hal focused his consciousness on this new internal organ of his.

Immediately, a giant crimson appeared in front of him.

"—The Crimson Queen!?"

For the very first time, the dragon king on the magic surfboard showed an expression of surprise.

Part 5

If Hinokagutsuchi's heartmetal was used in a birth ritual, the Crimson Queen would resurrect—

That was how the magic gun had replied to Hal's whim of an idea.

On further thought, Hal remembered how the dragon king's ghost had suddenly resurrected her past self during Raak Al Soth's attack on the Old Tokyo Concession.

By doing the same thing, Hal resurrected the red dragon king before his eyes right now.

Twenty meters in body length. Featuring dragon scales of vivid crimson, this dragon had the most strongly built physique he had seen so far. Long and large, the wings stretched out wide.

Nine golden horns were growing on the head. The chest region was ossified into an exoskeleton while shining with golden luster.

"O Haruomi... I never expected you to hold such a hidden ace."

From the air, Princess Yukikaze murmured softly.

Her beautiful face, resembling a snow fairy's, clearly expressed her surprised and impressed thoughts.

"Fufufu. Perhaps you intend to use this trump card and allow me to enjoy myself for a while? To allow me, Yukikaze, to fight the Crimson Queen again as the arrow's successor—!?"

Riding the magic surfboard, the princess looked straight down at the ground.

Not only did she ignore the reborn Rushalka, but she even showed no intention to attack the newly revived Crimson Queen. She wanted to see what move the other side would make.

Clearly, Princess Yukikaze's obsession with the Crimson Queen was extraordinary.

"Drive away the queen of the arrow like how you got rid of Soth last time...!"

Seizing the opportunity, Hal stared at the giant red dragon's back and whispered.

But no matter how he tried to transmit his thoughts, the queen remained motionless.

'But even if the ritual were to succeed... Will you be able to command the "queen"? That red heartmetal remains intimately linked to my soul—the soul of the former sovereign.'

During the mental conversation earlier, that was what Hinokagutsuchi had said.

Right now, the invisible queen's voice was also ringing in his ear.

'You are the bow's successor, after all, and even claimed my heartmetal. It should be possible to resonate with the queen's body, the former wielder of the bow, and control it after all. Just like how that puny Soth or whatever was driven away. However—'

Standing between Hal's mental communication with the queen was a more powerful "mind." Namely, the spiritual entity of the ghost, Hinokagutsuchi, who called herself the devil.

'If I interfered in this manner, what are you going to do!?'

"Nothing in particular! I'll cross that bridge when I come to it!"

Out of secret techniques and clever tricks, Hal yelled loudly.

From here on, all he could do was struggle to the very end. Hal summoned the magic gun to his right hand where the Rune of the Bow resided then pointed the muzzle at the Crimson Queen ahead and Hinokagutsuchi.

"Sorry, but I'm taking both your heartmetal and former body! Ghosts should act like ghosts and obediently yield to living people!"

Increasing Hal's magical power, the magic gun amplified his thoughts.

Encouraged by the magic gun, Hal used a tiny weapon shared by all of humanity. With every last ounce of "spirit and spine," he yelled loudly, "The queen's body—is mine!"

As a member of SAURU, Hal had experienced many difficult jobs.

Hence, he could safely assert the following. Under conditions of great adversity, what finally decided everything was "spirit and spine." He believed that a difficult job that could not be overcome in this way did not exist in this world.



However, was a mere human's meager spine enough to prevail against a dragon king's ghost?

Hinokagutsuchi's "mind" dispersed with astounding ease. The scattered remains of the spiritual body were then sucked into Hal's magic gun.

Hal immediately pulled the magic gun's trigger.

Due to firing all the bullets just now, the magazine was empty. But conversely, the Crimson Queen opened her gigantic jaws and discharged flames towards Princess Yukikaze who was standing in the air!

"Finally awake! However!"

Her mortal enemy's revival made Princess Yukikaze's eyes shine. A dragon's style as one would expect.

Pearly light—imperishable protection—enveloped the fiercely belligerent maiden dragon king, blocking the Crimson Queen's flames completely.

"Truly powerless, a body carrying the regrets of past death!"

"R-Rushalka! Engage in close quarters combat!"

Kneeling the whole time, Asya yelled.

One look at the side of her pained face was enough for Hal to know that she had not recovered from the birth ritual's ordeal. However, she had issued orders to her partner because she instinctively knew that things would be bad at this rate.

On standby in the air, Rushalka flew towards Princess Yukikaze.

Her flying was as smooth as water flowing downstream. Using her vigorous momentum, the blue wyvern aimed the horn on her forehead at the princess!

However, Rushalka's horn was also blocked by the princess' protection.

"Hmm... Looks like I won't get a tough battle even when it's two against one. Too bad, I'll just have to take care of them straight away."

After exhibiting impregnable defenses, the princess commented with a face of boredom.

Despite his short time facing her, it had already become readily apparent how she would react when she deemed her opponents weak. Fearfully, Hal looked up at the princess in the air.

"I hereby decree to my emblem, the Arrow of Sirius... I, Yukikaze, will now transform into the dragonslaying arrow!"

Carrying the princess, the magic surfboard began to ascend rapidly.

Rising fiercely like a rocket, they passed through the cloud layer within the blink of an eye, hurtling towards even greater heights in the sky. Her target was probably the stratosphere.

Naturally, she was not running away.

Hal knew as the successor of the bow, the weapon paired with hers. The queen of the arrow intended to accelerate continuously while descending from a great height, crashing down with unprecedented power.

Turning into what could erase everything without trace in a single attack—
The ultimate arrow.

As though to prove Hal's certainty, an ominous emblem appeared in the distant sky.

A horizontal oval stretching a kilometer long. Inside it was a sharp isosceles triangle. This was the dragonslaying rune he had just witnessed earlier.

"The Rune of the Arrow..."

And under that arrow emblem, twenty-one runes of Ruruk Soun also manifested.

This arrangement signified "Obtaining divine signs of lightning, I descend from heaven, turning into a whistling arrow to pierce the ground." Hal committed his determination. He was going to control the Crimson Queen to block that arrow.

Using the dragon's gigantic body—and himself—as a shield, he could at least reduce the arrow's destructive power.

"Luna, take everyone who can't move and escape. I'll try to use myself and the red dragon to stop the falling dragon king."

"Haruomi!?" "H-Haruga-kun...?" "Senpai!"

Asya, kneeling on the ground, Orihime, finally regaining consciousness, and Hazumi, still unable to get up, all exclaimed in surprise. However, Luna Francois, the only one still mobile, shook her head.

"In that case, I believe it would be best for Rushalka and my Glinda to assist together."

"No. That firepower is no joke. That's why..."

The fewer victims the better—Just as Hal suppressed these words and prepared to answer...

A truly feeble voice whispered "hmp" by his ear.

Then the magic gun in his right hand informed Hal about "a certain method." It was apparently transmitted to Asya and Orihime as well, those who were bound by vassal covenants.

"Haruomi! If we're going to do it, we should gamble on this method!"

"Indeed, you are not allowed to fight on your own like last time! Didn't you kneel down to promise me!?"

"I-I wasn't kneeling, it was just seiza, Juujouji..."

After a quick rebuttal, Hal made his decision. There was no time for hesitation.

"Since I don't know if escaping is possible, I might as well use this move. Fly!"

In response to his direction, the Crimson Queen flew into the air.

Fragments of stone crumbled and fell from the dragon's gigantic body. In addition, the color spontaneously turned faint with the crimson dragon scales, the golden horns and chest armor gaining translucence.

This was due to the weak link between this unstable body and the mortal realm. Perhaps it might even collapse in a matter of minutes. However—There was apparently a way to compensate.

"L-Look out! It's like a shooting star!"

Finally able to stand up, Hazumi pointed at the sky and cried out.

Just as she had pointed out, a shooting star enveloped in white lightning was falling towards the ground.

The estimated crash site was of course the school's sports ground, namely, the location of Hal and company. And amid the white lightning descending from the sky was a dragon.

It was not Princess Yukikaze racing gallantly on a magic surfboard.

Instead, it was a white dragon whose physique looked slender and agile. The chest and shoulder areas were covered by an exoskeleton of blue crystalline material. Flying downwards majestically, the long and large wings were spread out. This was Princess Yukikaze's transformed appearance that Hal had seen before in his dreams.

The snow fairy-like beautiful maiden was finally unleashing a serious strike!

"Rushalka! Receive... the queen's power!"

Then Asya yelled loudly.

In that instant, the Crimson Queen happened to be flying next to the blue wyvern.

So fast. The red dragon lunged towards Rushalka as though colliding—Then the dragon king and the imitation dragon merged together.

The queen's translucent body was gradually absorbed into Rushalka.

Next, the blue wyvern's massive body gained ruby-colored plating—armor for protecting the chest and torso. Furthermore, this armored portion even sprouted *two arms*.

Indeed, two arms, left and right. Arms for holding tools and wielding weapons.

These arms were forged from ruby-colored metal and even came equipped with joints. Five fingers were on each hand, tipped with sharp claws. Identical to the forelimbs of dragons.

"Almost like a dragon..."

No wonder Orihime murmured in response. Rushalka was originally a wyvern, i.e. a dragon with no forelimbs, but currently, her appearance was astoundingly similar to dragon kings and elites.

"Rushalka, use the Rune of the Bow!"

This time, it was Hal's turn to yell. As a result, a weapon appeared in the ruby left arm.

A crimson bow. An item carrying the same firepower as the Bow used by the Crimson Queen of past. The dragonslaying bow. The true power of dragonbane, only usable by dragon kings.

Then an arrow of light appeared in Rushalka's glowing right hand.

Next, twenty-one runes of Ruruk Soun manifested behind her. This arrangement signified—

"I will fire the sun-shooting divine bow at the sky, to exterminate the sun... O little girl Yukikaze, after a thousand-year absence, you shall taste my divine bow again!"

"Hahaha! You're over there, still not dead yet, queen!"

Hal's magic gun roared using a girl's voice. After seeing Rushalka and the bow, the dragon that was falling like a shooting star laughed happily.

The estimated time until the violent impact between the shooting star in dragon form and the school's sports ground was a hundred seconds.

"I can't believe you became that guy's minion!"

"Nonsense. This is—an alliance!"

Counting to the impact on the sports ground. Ninety seconds, eighty seconds, seventy... At that moment...

The arrow of light, wrapped in blazing flames, was shot from the divine bow to clash directly against the white dragon king who was descending upon the school, enveloped in flashing light.

The dragonslaying bow and the dragonslaying arrow clashed violently again after eight hundred odd years.

A blinding light erupted, turning the school—no, the area of the Sumida ward around the school—white. Shockwaves and explosive wind rampaged, smashing all glass on buildings and vehicles.

"Glinda, Gravity Wall!"

"Minadzuki! Please, protect us!"

Luna Francois and Hazumi instantly summoned their "serpents."

The massive lion-like and serpentine-dragon beasts hovered overhead above Hal and the witches, using their own bodies as shields. Next, Glinda deployed a gravity barrier while Minadzuki created a wall of reverse wind to consolidate their defenses.

Thanks to that, despite being in extremely close proximity, the school and Hal's group were spared...

Indeed. The dragonslaying arrow did not fall on Hal and company.

Then the explosive flash of light finally subsided and the field of vision gradually recovered in clarity.

Holding the crimson bow, Rushalka was the first to land on the school's sports ground. A single look at her exhausted appearance was enough to tell that she had depleted all her stamina and magical power.

Then there was the other one.

The white dragon, Princess Yukikaze's transformation, also descended slowly on the sports ground.

Hal jumped in fright. On that blue crystalline exoskeleton on the chest—the armor for protecting the heartmetal—there was a large hole. The fearsome queen of the arrow had been injured during the clash with the dragonslaying bow!

"I, Yukikaze, was too careless... I suppose—"

The princess' adorable voice came out of the white dragon king's mouth.

Despite the element of mirth, this dark voice would only come from someone reveling in the pleasures of battle.

"Fufufufu... After learning you had recruited the former queen to your side, I couldn't help but feel overjoyed, so I recklessly launched an attack. What I got in exchange was a serious wound..."

Turning her giant eyeballs, the princess stared at the ground sharply.

It was very clear that she was staring at Haruga Haruomi. Feeling the fighting spirit and bloodthirst conveyed in her gaze, Hal instant felt his back run cold. Even so, he still took on the princess' gaze squarely.

He totally had no idea how his life would change from here on.

Nevertheless, quaking in fear every time something similar happened would not be an option.

"Hoo—I suppose it might be fun to continue the battle while ignoring this serious wound."

Hal noticed that the princess' tone had recovered in cheerfulness.

"However, I never expected that a rematch with the bow user would be possible after a thousand years... It would be boorish to succumb to momentary impatience. Fufu, Haruomi."

Her voice was very lively now, even producing an impression of calm composure.

"I, Yukikaze, intend to take my time to enjoy our contest. Let us pit our wits and valor against each other, I as a sovereign and you as the Tyrannos, in a bid for hegemony."

"M-Me and you...?"

"Indeed. First, take out the silver dragon that's in hiding, to claim the 'wedge' in this so-called 'Toukyou' city, shall we?"

"If possible, I hope you won't involve the residents of New Town..."

"Fufu. If you have any objections, don't waste your breath on words. Just fight back with force. I, Yukikaze, welcome a fight any time. Bye for now, Haruomi. As well as the former Crimson Queen!"

Leaving behind these words, the white dragon king spread her wings and slowly rose up in the sky.

Her flying speed was quite slow, completely different from the princess who flew as swiftly as an arrow earlier. Perhaps damage to the heartmetal was a consideration.

However, from Hal's viewpoint, it looked like the following.

Perhaps she was wistfully bidding goodbye to her new mortal enemy—

Part 6

In any case, Hal and company managed to survive a dragon king's attack.

No one spoke for five minutes after the white dragon's exit. Not a single word.

Instead, they all stared blankly at the sky—where Princess Yukikaze had flown away. Whether Hal, Asya, Orihime or Hazumi. Even Luna Francois.

The encounter and battle was this shocking.

But soon after, Orihime finally spoke up.

"Although so much has happened, I'm glad we survived."

Phew~~ She expressed her opinion while sighing deeply. Then sweeping her gaze across everyone's face, she seemed to inquire "Are you okay?" with a carefree smile. Influenced by her, Hal smiled wryly in return.

"Yeah. I guess that's right, Juujouji."

"Thank goodness. Seeing such depressed looks on everyone, I was thinking someone might raise an objection."

Orihime winked and joked.

She was deliberately being humorous to ease the atmosphere. At times like these, Orihime would always be the first to show care for others, trying to change the ambiance. To Hal, this aspect of hers was very dazzling.

"I-I'm not depressed at all..." Asya concurred. She had her head lowered limply.

"A technique of assured annihilation, right? When firing the queen's divine bow, Rushalka needed to Double Cast pseudo-divinity to pour in magical power..."

Hal's childhood friend murmured, looking utterly drained.

To think she tasked her "serpent" with such a challenging job in that instant, Asya was impressive as always. And Hal also knew what she was going to say next.

"Due to the aforementioned reason, I'm completely famished..."

An expected confession. Hal smiled wryly again.

Orihime smiled cheerfully as well. On closer examination, the corners of Hazumi's lips finally curled up too. As for Luna Francois, she was shrugging in a somewhat exaggerated manner.

Hal concluded he had to make things clear sooner after all. He walked over to Hazumi.

"Shirasaka, can I have a word with you?"

"Y-Yes. Is something the matter!? Senpai."

"About what we talked about last time... I want to entrust the rune's power to you."

"—!?"

"But let's be blunt, this is something like the devil's temptation. If you continue to follow me, I'm guessing there will be repeated encounters with monsters like earlier. Monsters that think nothing of elites. You might even shoulder unnecessary burdens."

"S-Senpai..."

"Since that's the kind of invitation it is, I won't force you. The same goes for Asya and Juujouji. If you don't think you can follow me to the bitter end, I don't mind if you stop assisting me."

"Haruga-kun..."

Hazumi and Orihime showed surprise in their eyes while staring at the shrugging Hal.

Perhaps the number of comrades to entrust the power of dragonbane might increase from now on.

However, Hal believed that this type of behavior was tantamount to the devil's temptation. The exact same as when Hinokagutsuchi had invited Haruga Haruomi in the past. Nevertheless, Hal was also a SAURU agent who had cultivated many witches.

The self-styled devil and Hal's positions were very similar to begin with—

One could perhaps assert that. Meanwhile, Asya sighed and cast a warm gaze—more precisely, it was lukewarm at a somewhat low temperature—towards him.

"You intend to seriously confront this matter—involving stuff like dragon kings and the power of dragonbane, etc... Is that what's going on?"

"Yeah. For the moment now, I'll work on a rental basis per offer."

"Like lending the power of dragonbane to the TPDO or autonomous entities like Tokyo New Town, then exacting a reward for every contract?"

After Hal voiced a roughly conceptualized plan that had been sitting in the back of his mind, his childhood friend swiftly understood and nodded in response.

This sort of mercenary-like system was precisely Asya's business model.

Namely, signing contracts that specified the compensation amount per sortie to provide Asya's outstanding power as a witch and Rushalka's services to local authorities, government agencies, military organizations, NPOs, etc around the world.

"This is not a bad idea. But since the rune's power can only be conferred upon specific 'serpents'... Wanna operate the business together?"

"Yeah. Come to think of it, that's no different from before."

Hal had returned to New Town originally because of Asya's invitation.

Like the two of them accepting the job of making Juujouji Orihime a witch, they had also worked together in the past to handle jobs referred to them from SAURU.

"...Since it's decided, I'd like to make a suggestion to Luna."

"Is it something interesting? I love under-the-table deals where I can profit without lifting a finger."

Seeing Luna answer so confidently, Hal wondered if she might have already guessed what he was going to say.

While feeling a sense of camaraderie as "birds of a feather" towards Luna Francois' excellent perception, Hal said, "Basically, I'd like to invite you to serve as something like a representative for me."

"Oh my, you mean handling requests coming from various places then negotiating with the other parties?"

"Yeah. You've got a wide network and an excellent way with words, so there shouldn't be any problem... But this will have to wait until the current mess gets settled."

Hal looked west. The other witches followed suit.

In the distance, the imposing Monolith could be seen. A triangular prism of pure black, over a thousand meters in height. It was a terrifying landmark in the Tokyo area.

If one were to stare intently using magical sight, the Rune of the Sword would be faintly visible in the air over the Monolith.

Pavel Galad was currently hiding somewhere. Tokyo still remained under his "occupation."

Evening at the Academy—

In order to deliver the still unconscious President M to a police hospital, Luna Francois had summoned a police officer from the MPD. The witches all went over to help.

Meanwhile, Hal went to the sports ground on his own.

Under the setting sun that was dyeing everything bright red, Hal spoke aloud on purpose, "...In the end, you still accepted my proposal."

"Nothing noteworthy. After all, there seems to be more value in using you than I originally thought. Rather than squeezing you dry, it would be better to extend a helping hand as your benefactor."

The girl dressed in the scarlet kimono appeared next to Hal and bragged.

Naturally, it was Hinokagutsuchi, the one whose resume included titles such as former dragon queen, ghost and self-styled devil.

"Although you're currently taking residence in my gun... Is that really okay?"

"I am guarding your wand, fool. Now that my wisdom is added to it, this wand houses supreme power that is in no way inferior to the wands of dragon kings."

When Hal attempted to control the Crimson Queen, the interfering Hinokagutsuchi had been dispersed by Hal's fighting spirit, causing her spiritual body to enter the magic gun.

"Be that as it may, I am exhausted from using too much power recently. I might very well vanish if I did not find something to possess. This happens to work out perfectly, yes."

"No option to move on obediently to the afterlife huh..."

Despite exchanging annoying words with each other, the atmosphere between them had changed greatly from before.

Perhaps because during that moment in the contest for control over the queen, Hinokagutsuchi had compromised on purpose.

Then again, it was also possible that Hinokagutsuchi had revised her opinion of Hal slightly in a favorable direction.

"Listen here, brat. I would like to have the man named 'Solomon' resurrected in the modern era."

"By Solomon... Are you referring to the ancient king of Israel? The one who controlled seventy-two demons?"

King Solomon was a legendary sage as well as a great mage. The son of the hero, King David.

Hal was taken aback by the unexpected name.

"You sure know some weird stuff even though you're clearly a dragon... Why the heck?"

"Well, it's just for fun. After all, I am dead with nothing else to do. And it was a request from someone long ago in the past. If memory serves me correctly, it might have been a human little girl—from somewhere."

"That's really crazy. Who would make such a ridiculous request?"

"Hmph. To think you would pry into a lady's past. How tactless of you, brat?"

"Technically speaking, you're a female dragon, not a lady."

"Rein in your twisted logic. It seems that we still need to get along for a period of time. Never forget that kneeling in worship is necessary to appease me."

"Come on, change it to 'a show of care' instead."

"Furthermore, allow me to continue in assisting birth rituals. It is too dangerous relying on you alone."

"...Somehow, I get the feeling that you're harboring impure motives."

"...Then I shall try a different description. Give me some perks. Excellent opportunities for enjoying the tender skin of young ladies should not be wasted, after all."

"You're honest only during times like these. How unreliable."

Regardless, with the subject concluded, Hinokagutsuchi disappeared again.

By the time he noticed, the setting sun had sunk far in the west. Just as he was about to return to the school building, Hal noticed Orihime waiting for him there.

"...Have you finished talking to Kagutsuchi-san?"

"I guess. It feels like we're slowly going back to normal."

"Isn't that great? She is our comrade after all. Oh right, by the way, about what you said earlier regarding working with Asya-san..."

Orihime smiled mischievously and pointed at herself.

"The prior assumption is that I will be participating too, right?"

"Are you sure? Although it seems like you'll be handsomely rewarded, life will most likely be tough. And the effort demanded might rival sweatshop labor. There's so much work to do that it even feels like I've got no choice but to revise the plan I've been brewing for many years, 'saving up a huge sum of money so as to retire in leisure at the age of thirty,' postponing my retirement to the age of forty instead."

"Haruga-kun, your plan is so dull and lifeless even though you're only in your teens right now..."

After expressing her poignant opinion, Orihime said cheerfully, "Although I'm not one to go looking for hardship, I believe it is a good thing for work to be busier. Besides, it's not like I can keep foisting troublesome tasks on you and the others, Haruga-kun."

Smiling in a carefree manner, Orihime looked dazzling as always to Hal.

Whether the former dragon of shady origins or a human like Hal with a suspicious business for a career, she considered both of them "comrades" whom she could confide fully in.

"...Wait a sec, this is about kings, right? Wouldn't it be fun if we simply made Juujouji the figurehead sovereign while I serve as the regent or archbishop? Asya lacks charisma as a leader, so she's not suited to be the sovereign..."

"What was that, Haruga-kun? Look at you, muttering to yourself over there alone."

"Nothing much, a thought just occurred to me."

This was a notion brought about by Hinokagutsuchi's mention of "King Solomon."

However, what they currently needed to think about was the unknown whereabouts of Pavel Galad as well as the possible upcoming battle. As it happened, night was soon about to fall. With the rising of the moon, the consumed usage counts of pseudo-divinity by Rushalka and the others would be reset.

Side by side, Hal and Orihime walked into the school building.

Part 7

On the fourth night after the mystic spell of Ruruk Soun had been cast on Tokyo New Town...

Pavel Galad was scowling inside his sickroom, a Japanese-style room in a community center that had been converted into a shelter. The futon, which had remained laid out until this morning, was folded and set aside in a corner.

Galad was still maintaining human form. Also, there were two visitors present.

They were the two girls who had remained unaffected back when the magic spell known as "Freeze" to those in the anti-dragon field was cast, thanks to the barrier deployed by Galad.

"Aren't you going to eat dinner, Mr. Handsome? It's pretty good, actually."

"The people from the SDF helped cook it. Although I've heard rumors before, it really is much tastier than the retort pouches and instant food distributed by police and fire department personnel."

"...No thanks."

With a stiff expression, Galad refused the food brought by the two high school girls, Funaki-san and Mutou-san.

The menu consisted of hamburger steak with vegetables minced into it, stew, coleslaw salad and white rice. The girls were chattering away while eating.

However, human food was unnecessary for Galad.

Had he the intention, eating was possible too. Be that as it may, this human body was created using the magic of dragons, hence it did not require nourishment. On the other hand, the girls in front of him—

Absorbing their blood and essence might replenish his energy, actually.

However, these two were humans, after all, which meant their blood volume was limited. Unless he greedily ingested blood from female serpents, the "imitations" assisting the successor of the bow last time, it was probably impossible to heal his original massive body of a dragon.

Still, speaking of users of dragonslaying power—

Galad left the girls and walked over to the window.

He looked up at the night sky where only stars could be seen. However, he had definitely spotted the Rune of the Arrow shining in the sky during the daytime. The white dragon king, Princess Yukikaze, had arrived in this city!

"Urgh..."

Currently, fighting at full strength was beyond him, filling Galad with abject regret.

According to the rules of dragons, this city was currently under Galad's authority. Whether intercepting the princess who had invaded willfully or negotiating with her, both were supposed to be his responsibilities.

"But to think I am this incompetent—!"

For the past few days, his body had been extremely weak, to the extent that he could not move as he wished.

And the whole time, he was being sheltered by humans, by these girls before him. With a human face, Galad began to gnash his teeth.

To think that a dragon was accepting charity from primates, the side being exploited and preyed on—

This was unprecedented humiliation. However, there was gratifying news. Probably thanks to lying down quietly for a number of days, Galad's human body had recovered some energy. He felt that he was now able to move around and use magic slightly.

He had to leave this place as soon as possible—Just as Galad was thinking that...

"Could it be that you want to get some outside air?"

"You've been sleeping in the room the whole time, after all. Want us to take you outside?"

Mutou-san and Funaki-san suggested to him.

Twenty minutes later, led by the two girls, Galad arrived outside of the community center.

Since this center was also a large facility used for events such as public speeches, the parking lot at the front entrance was quite spacious. The three of them walked here.

Keeping their pace slow, Mutou-san and Funaki-san walked in front.

This was out of consideration for the semi-patient who was sometimes not too steady on his feet. However, Galad followed them silently without noticing this.

"...Hmm?"

"Oh, they've been flying around a lot lately. It's scary."

"I overheard a conversation between SDF members. Those things are currently searching for something extremely dangerous—That's the gist, I think. But what on earth is it?"

Galad frowned and stared at the sky, causing Funaki-san to cower uncomfortably. Meanwhile, Mutou-san revealed this piece of inside information.

The trio were looking at a blue Raptor soaring in the night sky.

This area was Minamikasai in the Edogawa ward. The blue Raptor seemed to be flying at low speed in a large circle over this neighborhood, meanwhile gazing at the ground with a dragon's sharp gaze.

Then Galad noticed.

There was magic residing in the winged lizard's gaze—

An elite somewhere had probably cast detection magic. Even when the target was using Transformation magic to hide his appearance, those eyes would still be able to see the dragon flames hidden inside his body.

Circling in the sky over Minamikasai, the blue Raptor suddenly began to cry out.

Kuahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Kuahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

It was a call for its comrades to gather, because that winged lizard had discovered its prey, Pavel Galad, the successor to the Rune of the Sword.

"W-What is going on!?"

"I-I-I've never seen this kind of situation before, what do we do~~!?"

"This place is about to turn into a battlefield—Simple as that."

Feeling the warning signs of war, Galad clicked his tongue.

Normally, he would happily prepare for battle even when injured. This was a dragon's nature and instinct. However, to be discovered and attacked by the enemy simply because he went out for a brief stroll—Galad finally realized now.

The only reason why he could spend the last few days in peace was undoubtedly thanks to the humans hiding him.

He became aware of this fact. For Galad, a pure-blooded dragon, this was ultimate humiliation and a irredeemable stain on his reputation.

Gritting his teeth hard with emotion, Galad glared angrily at the girls beside him.

Chapter 5 - Bow and Arrow, as well as...

Part 1

'Aren't the majority of New Town's administrative departments and the city council "frozen"?'

On the car's navigation screen, Hiiragi-san was speaking somewhat casually. She was SAURU's technical consultant as well as being the female executive on the inside track to become the next Kantou branch chief.

Currently at Yokohama, she was speaking through a video call over the internet.

'The cabinet and the national assembly have convened on their behalf for a number of days already. The main agenda was how to handle this "illegal occupation of Tokyo New Town by dragonkind." Anyway, since the Minister of State on the countermeasures committee has stepped down due to a public gaffe, a new minister will be taking over today.'

"Countermeasures have been delayed for too long, I suppose."

Seated as the driver, Hal gripped the steering wheel and commented quietly.

He had borrowed a 4WD military vehicle from the JGSDF and was speeding along a new highway on the coast. Orihime was in the front passenger seat while Asya sat in the back.

'There are a number of reasons. Firstly, no elites have appeared in the East Asian region including Japan for the past fifteen years. Secondly, a somewhat stable situation has been maintained during this period, ignoring Raptor appearances. Thirdly, people have grown complacent due to these reasons... Rather, they lack a sense of crisis.'

"Unlike the major war zones of Europe and North America, people here can't deal with sudden calamities."

'That's indeed the case. By the way, have you received the aid supplies I sent over?'

"Yes. However... Eating this many mooncakes will make me overweight."

Orihime was the one who answered. On her lap was a paper bag.

An unmanned remote-controlled helicopter belonging to the JMSDF had delivered a small quantity of supplies to the Shin-Kiba reclaimed land, including a package for Hal's group from Hiiragi-san.

It was a paper bag filled with dozens of mooncakes from a famous Chinese restaurant.

"Despite their small size, each mooncake contains a large amount of sugar with abundant fat and calories..."

'That's why they're good. Portable food with high calories will definitely come in handy. I went out of my way to buy them from Chinatown, so make good use of them.'

Waving goodbye from the screen, Hiiragi-san ended the call.

Hal muttered "I see" while Orihime looked at the back seat with a nod. Asya was currently meditating with her eyes closed, apparently oblivious to the conversation just now. At the moment, she was remotely controlling her partner that had finally gone through rebirth.

"I understand now. So virtually all of them are for Asya-san."

The 4WD vehicle was racing at maximum speed along the coastal highway, passing the vicinity of Shin-Kiba then successfully crossing the Arakawa to advance towards Gasai. Since there were no other cars driving on the road, Hal could drive as fast as possible without worry.

All the Raptors in New Town had started gathering in the Edogawa ward—

After receiving this news, Hal and company were hurrying to the scene. Using remote control, his childhood friend had sent Rushalka ahead first.

"By the way, Haruga-kun... It seems that Asya-san cannot hear us."

"Yeah, that's right, because she's concentrating hard, probably tuning herself to the revived Rushalka to carefully check the situation."

"Then allow me to change the subject... It suddenly occurred to me after getting in the car, actually."

Orihime looked like she was having trouble bringing up the subject. With some embarrassment, she said, "Didn't Rushalka use a finishing move against Princess Yukikaze—that dragon king of a girl?"

"Yeah, except that she was in the form of a dragon, that's all."

"Haruga-kun, you didn't touch... Asya-san *there*, did you?"

"Oh right!"

"C-Could it be that it is not an essential action...? In my case, the gun was actually lying back then to accommodate your dirty thoughts, Haruga-kun— That shouldn't be the case... Right?"

"O-Of course not, Juujouji."

Although Hal had admitted to being a closet pervert, he still asserted instantly with his honor on the line.

"Let's speculate. I think Asya did a Double Cast of pseudo-divinity when firing the bow. Perhaps that's why she didn't need my assistance?"

"I-Indeed, that might be true. After all, Asya-san and I are on different levels!"

Blushing to their ears, the two of them tried to ponder the reason.

Then silently, they stared ahead at where they were going, enduring the slightly embarrassing atmosphere.

"Say... Supposing that speculation were to be correct..."

"S-Sure."

"When the time comes, will we have no choice but to do that again...? Besides, this time's enemy is very strong too."

"Better to call her a super formidable foe far surpassing the last."

"So ultimately, there's no way around it... Let us do our best just as we decided together yesterday, Haruga-kun. I-I believe it is our obligation!"

".....Yeah, s-since it's an obligation, it definitely can't be helped..."

"B-But to do that to another girl apart from me—when fighting alongside witches who are not as strong as Asya-san, I suppose I'd like to say that I don't want you to do that sort of thing? I would be very happy if you could exercise greater prudence. M-My wish is that you'll only do it to me—"

"U-Umm, Juujouji... What exactly are you trying to say...?"

Juujouji Orihime kept murmuring softly, which was quite rare for her.

However, this uncharacteristic behavior of hers, murmuring emphatically nonstop, felt inexplicably adorable, even to the point of troubling Hal. But actually, somewhere in the bottom of his heart, Hal seemed to understand what Orihime was implying, but was it right to interpret it that way? The hesitation in his heart was making Hal unsure.

Hence, he asked timidly, causing Orihime to blush and bow her head.

"T-Take Hazumi for example. If you could restrain yourself and not do that to her, I would be very hap—"

Suddenly, Orihime jumped in fright.

"Ah... A-As her elder sister, I forbid you from doing anything sleazy to her. I was speaking out of duty just now without implying anything else."

"Oh okay."

Hal did not know if it was because she was already plunged into confusion or not, but Orihime was inexplicably speaking in polite forms.

"B-Besides, other than me, no girl could possibly be generous enough to accept a closet pervert such as you, Haruga-kun."

"Well... That's certainly true."

"I-In any case, let us do our best together!"

With many things still ambiguous, the topic of conversation reached an end by the time Hal noticed.

At this moment, a call was received through the internet on the cellphone that was connected to the navigation screen. It was Luna Francois. Operating the navigation system, Hal started the video call.

'Preparations are complete on my side.'

Luna Francois' face was displayed on the screen. Hazumi was there too.

"We're almost done too."

'Then let us begin as previously agreed. I shall pray for all of you to receive fortune's blessings... But frankly speaking, my true specialty is praying for misfortune.'

"Your confession really doesn't make me feel touched."

Listening to the girl who was called a "demon" by her fellow witch, Hal could not help but grumble. Then he spoke to his comrade in the screen while Orihime also nodded at the same person.

"Shirasaka, I'm counting on you."

"Don't make things out to be too complicated. Just cut loose and do it."

'I-I understand, Senpai. N-Nee-sama, watch me carefully. I will do my very best.'

Shirasaka Hazumi's angelic visage was displayed on the car's navigation screen.

Anyone could see that she was extremely nervous.

"Then let us begin. Although Hazumi-san will be chiefly responsible, our

first objective is to clear a path—In other words, exterminate the Raptors gathered in that airspace as quickly as possible, so as to reduce Rushalka and Akuro-Ou's burdens."

"Y-Yes... But is this really okay?"

Facing Luna Francois who could be considered the commander, Hazumi asked.

The two of them were located at Shin-Kiba's pier. In front of them was the vast Tokyo Bay. In their surroundings, roughly fifteen police officers were on standby as support.

"We're not heading to the scene with Senpai and company..."

"Don't worry, it will be fine. Biding our time as reserve forces is also an important mission. Besides, it's not every day that we have handy *projectiles* at our disposal. Let us fight the battle with efficiency."

"Y-Yes."

Hazumi nodded then looked east.

Reportedly, all the dragons circling around New Town had gathered towards Gasai. With determination, Hazumi called out to the air, "Respond to my summon, Minadzuki!"

A glowing pentagram appeared over the pier, then transformed into the shape of an infinity symbol before turning into a winged serpent.

It was Minadzuki, the emerald leviathan in the form of a serpentine dragon. Hazumi touched the back of her right hand. Appearing there was a pictograph reminiscent of a "tilted half moon"—

The Ruruk Soun symbol signifying the dragonslaying bow, the Rune of the Bow.

It was what Haruomi-senpai had entrusted to her before setting off.

"I want to be helpful to Senpai. And I also have to assist Nee-sama and Asya-san... So lend your strength to me!"

In a rare moment, Hazumi yelled shrilly at her partner.

Then Hazumi started controlling magic power herself. Three days ago, Hazumi had performed Enemy Detection and Spatial Awareness magic unfamiliarly, but this time, she was not controlling Minadzuki remotely.

Hence, magic control was much easier than last time.

As though looking down on a map, Hazumi scouted out the distribution of blue Raptors over the Minamikasai sky in the Edogawa ward.

Near the mouth of the Kyuedogawa river mouth connected to Tokyo Bay...

Dozens of Raptors were flying back and forth in excitement, surrounding the community center located there. The precise number was—sixty-seven of them.

The battle had already started on the ground next to the community center.

As though cheering for this fight, the sixty-seven Raptors opened their mouths and howled nonstop. It was probably crazy noisy at the scene itself.

Even the Raptors were concerned about the lineup of participants in the fight—

This unusual scene was rendering Hazumi dumbstruck but she had to prioritize the completion of her own mission first.

Hazumi took a deep breath.

Raptors were normally the color of steel, but the sixty-seven Raptors gathered here were blue. According to Haruomi-senpai, this type of Raptor was imbued with imitation dragonslaying power.

They were formidable enemies that even the Shootdown Ace's partner, Glinda, must not take lightly if she were to mobilize.

Not only that, the risk of getting killed by the enemy was not low. And this type of mission had been entrusted to her. Entrusted to her whom had been conferred the power of dragonbane, the Rune of the Bow—!

"Please... Will you lend me your strength?"

Again, Hazumi touched the seal on her right hand, the Rune of the Bow.

Instantly, Minadzuki called out gracefully as though singing a victorious song of triumph.

Raaaaa raaaaa raaaaa raaaaa...

—In the past, Minadzuki's right forelimb was extraordinarily developed and equipped with sharp claws. After all, that was the so-called horn counterpart. But after her rebirth, both the left and right forelimbs became the same size while a white jewel was added to the right hand to replace the long and sharp claws.

When Minadzuki opened her emerald right palm, the jewel floated up.

The jewel transformed into a "long white tube" on its master's shoulder. From Hazumi's perspective, it looked like a rifle. Both the barrel and the stock were long. It even featured a trigger.

"Eh!?"

"My goodness, it resembles a musket greatly."

Hearing Luna Francois' quiet remark, Hazumi could not help but nod in agreement. The "gun" transformed from the jewel was simple in design and as elegant as an antique.

Indeed, an arquebus or a musket would be an apt description for this type of antiquated firearm.

Hazumi was informed by instinct that this gun was the "bow" created by Minadzuki.

Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!

The instant Minadzuki's voice sounded out, the musket discharged a white flash of light. This light flew east into the distance—the sky above Minamikasai.

Traversing ward boundaries, it shot from Shin-Kiba in the Kōtō ward to the river mouth of the Edogawa.

At the same time, it accurately pierced the chest of a Raptor flying in the air at the scene. What a splendid long-distance sniper shot. After shooting down one Raptor, it immediately changed direction and angle to penetrate the next Raptor in the chest. Then it flew towards the subsequent Raptor—

This white flash of light repeated this change of direction and auto-homing for nearly sixty times in total.

The white light traced out lines in the sky above the Edogawa River's mouth like a pen in a frenzied dance. It was clearly visible even from Hazumi and Luna's location at the Shin-Kiba pier, almost like a night of fireworks.

Then, the Raptors with their chest pierced—

Their entire bodies broke down and crumbled, gradually collapsing into tiny particles.

Through magically amplified vision, Hazumi witnessed this scene unerringly. This was the power of the Rune of the Bow!

Gathered in the sky over Minamikasai, the Raptors were instantly whittled down to less than ten.

"Glinda, charge in deep! Long Ride!"

Luna Francois instantly commanded, summoning Glinda to the air.

The leviathan, bearing the appearance of a lion with additional heads of a green dragon and a black goat, flew towards the battlefield. Her mission was to restrain the remaining Raptors while remotely controlled by Luna.

"Gravity Shield!"

Luna Francois yelled, producing a black magic circle behind Glinda.

Rivalling a the gigantic body of a "serpent," the large circle had a pentagram symbol inscribed within it. Like a carriage drawn by a horse, it flew in pursuit of the three-headed lion. Since it was not possible to invoke pseudo-divinity while controlling a "serpent" remotely, anything to entrust had to be done now.

Regardless, the mission was accomplished for now.

"Th-Thank goodness..."

Just as Hazumi breathed a sigh of relief and was about to disengage vision amplification magic...

In a corner of her vision, a blue wyvern was rapidly descending towards the ground. Naturally, that was Rushalka, but her flying form was surging with unprecedented power.

Part 2

"Target discovered. Developments are unfolding as predicted."

From the back seat, Asya suddenly opened her eyes and spoke.

She had kept her eyes shut all this time, focused on controlling Rushalka remotely. At this moment, Minadzuki had just used the Rune of the Bow to snipe from long distance, clearing out the almost sixty Raptors all at once.

The 4WD vehicle driven by Hal exited the coastal road and entered the Loop 7 main route.

They had already reached Minamikasai. From the front passenger seat, Orihime asked Asya in the back, "The shelter is nearby, isn't it? What is the damage situation over there?"

"I was worried about the same thing, which is why I sent Rushalka ahead of us... But it seems fine for now."

A blue wyvern descended gracefully in front of the speeding 4WD vehicle.

This was Rushalka, returning after being sent ahead to scout and rescue lives if necessary. Her flying form was agile yet powerful. Having worked with her for so long, Hal knew very well.

The "serpent" on the verge of death had completely recovered the speed and agility of her peak condition.

Rushalka was flying slightly above the Loop 7 route, so as to lead the way. Driving the 4WD vehicle, Hal followed the blue wyvern. Soon after, they arrived in front of the community center.

This facility was located near the Edogawa river mouth.

Just by crossing the road, one would immediately reach the river's wide and grassy shore.

Currently, the sky above had turned into a battlefield where two dragons were locked in a duel. As one would expect, one of them was the silver dragon, Pavel Galad.

Bathed under the illumination of starlight and street lamps, his gigantic body of metallic silver shone with luster.

The other side was the old dragon, Exhos. Having pledged allegiance to Princess Yukikaze four days earlier, this dragon was all bones except for a pair of steel wings.

'Hahahaha. Lord Tyrannos of the Sword, as I suspected, that body of yours cannot fight to your heart's content, can it?' it?' it?'

"Curse you—!"

Mocked by the old dragon Exhos, the young Galad angered immensely.

Resembling a bone specimen, Exhos was riding a bronze discus hovering in the sky. This discus suddenly accelerated, flying towards the silver dragon.

With the wings on his back spread out, Galad was motionless in the air.

In his right hand, he was holding the dragonslaying sword—a longsword materialized from the Rune of the Sword. Galad swung this sword in an attempt to chop apart Exhos' discus that was approaching at high speed.

However, the dragonslaying sword shattered, accompanied by an acute sound akin to breaking glass.

Then Galad's damaged gigantic body was blown away violently, crashing to the ground.

He fell next to the shore of the Kyuedogawa. As a clearing consisting of a large stretch of lawn laid with pedestrian trails, it was able to withstand the impact from an elite dragon's massive body.

Seeing the silver dragon putting up a pathetic fight, unworthy of the formidable foe he once was, Hal muttered quietly, "So his wounds haven't healed yet...?"

"Not only that. What the old emaciated bag of bones is riding is also 'the power of dragonbane.' Of course, it is an imitation and not the real thing— But I do concede that it is quite well done."

"An imitation of dragonslaying power. So that guy really can use it too."

Listening to Hinokagutsuchi's voice echoing in the car, Hal nodded. Compared to before when she would only offer vague hints, she was providing guidance at opportune moments now.

This was probably the way the self-styled devil showed her care after merging with the magic gun and entering an alliance.

Hal stopped the car at the bus terminus in front of the community center.

There were three minibuses parked there as well. Furthermore, Rushalka was currently circling in the air slowly, waiting for her partner's instructions.

Just as Hal, Asya and Orihime disembarked together, planning to head to the shore...

"O-Oh my? Why are all of you here?"

"Uh, Haruga-kun, why can you drive!?"

Hal looked back, only to see his classmate Funaki-san in shock. Mutou-san was also staring wide-eyed.

Twenty or thirty apparently ordinary people, encompassing both genders and a range of ages, were standing in front of the community center aimlessly. Orihime spoke to her classmates, "You two... were taking shelter here, I guess?"

"Y-Yeah. Along with others, we're holed up in the main hall here, discussing stuff like when to escape. There are still a lot of people inside the building."

"With so many flying dragons gathered here, going outside is scary too. But—"

Compared to the distraught Funaki-san, Mutou-san was evidently far more calm. Pointing at the sky, she said, "A beam of light flew in from somewhere and took care of a whole load of dragons... That's why we took the chance to go outside to check out the situation. Besides, someone's gone missing."

"Missing, you say?"

"Yeah. But more precisely, that's not quite the right description..."

Confronted with Hal's question, Mutou-san hesitated, so Funaki-san interrupted, "U-Umm, there was a handsome guy who transformed right

before our eyes. Transforming instantly like those red and silver giants in children's shows. That's right, he turned into that dragon!"

" " " " " "

Hal, Orihime and Asya could not help but fall silent.

Funaki-san was pointing at the shore where the silver dragon was trying to get up. Compared to a Giant of Light, Pavel Galad ran out of strength and fell on his knees.

In the end, the dragon glared viciously at Exhos and the dragonslaying discus with seething rage in his eyes.

Meanwhile, Mutou-san shook her head with an expression of disbelief.

"Well, I'd like to say it was our imagination or mistake, but both Funaki-san and I saw it happen clearly. Our memories are definitely not mistaken... Although he had been glaring at us with a very scary look, as soon as that bone specimen monster showed up, he transformed..."

"Say, was that guy someone in the shelter with an unknown identity by any chance?"

"Wow, you're amazing, Haruga-kun. Right on the money!"

As suspected, he had taken on human form after all. Hal nodded.

Then Asya shrugged and said, "I get the basic gist of things now. Since there's no time, I'm going to give simple instructions. You two, please return to the building over there and tell everyone to evacuate. As for the Raptors—dragons—It's fine to ignore them."

At this moment, the three-headed leviathan happened to be flying overhead.

Luna Francois had sent her as agreed in advance. To fight the few Raptors remaining in this airspace, Glinda pounced with claws and teeth ready.

However, the blue variant Raptors were supposed to carry emulated power of dragonbane.

Wouldn't that put Glinda in a difficult fight or even a risk of dying?

Hal could not help but worry—But it turned out to be unnecessary paranoia. The orange-furred lion leviathan was leading a pentagram magic circle behind her as though drawing a carriage.

This magic circle suddenly jumped in front of Glinda.

It was almost like a shield. The blue Raptors spewed bronze-colored flames at the approaching lion. Hal could tell from sight that these were

dragonslaying flames. However, the black pentagram blocked these flames reliably. This was a gravity shield that blocked physical attacks completely. The power of dragonbane infused in the bronze-colored flames seemed to be relatively weak.

The gravity shield proved fully effective, protecting Glinda's massive body properly.

"Since pseudo-divinity cannot be invoked while controlling remotely, I sent her along with this first..."

Effortlessly defusing arduous situations, she obtained victory single-handedly.

Hal was thoroughly awed and impressed with Luna Francois' brilliance, worthy of her title as the Shootdown Ace, as well as her underlying strength as a master mage.

Protected by the gravity barrier, the hovering Glinda opened the jaws of the green dragon and black goat heads. Then she breathed out scarlet flames, incinerating the bodies of Raptors.

Inflicted with fatal injuries from the flame breath attack, blue winged dragons kept crashing down.

It looked like there was no need to worry about things on that front. Hal turned to face his classmates anew.

"Then I'm counting on you two to handle things on the shelter side. We still have business to attend to."

"See you in school. Bye!"

Hal made his request briefly and Orihime cheerfully bid them goodbye.

The two female classmates nodded in response with stunned looks. Seeing that, Hal and company immediately started to sprint, advancing towards the riverside.

"Rushalka, come to me. Prepare to fight!"

"Akuro-Ou, we will be starting a decisive battle too. Arrive instantly!"

Asya ran while summoning her partner. Orihime also raised her voice to chant a song of summoning.

The blue wyvern instantly responded to Asya's summon and went on the move. The white nine-tailed fox-wolf also appeared in the air suddenly. Witnessing the witches controlling "serpents," Mutou-san and Funaki-san were dumbfounded in surprise.

However, these matters would have to be dealt with later—

Hal and company arrived at the spacious lawn on the river bank.

In the air, the old dragon Exhos had summoned eleven runes of Ruruk Soun over his head, signifying "false weapon."

'Come, royal authority of dragonslaying. Give me even more power—!' !' !'

Exhos was riding the bronze discus and hovering in the air.

Eight identical discuses suddenly appeared behind him. Were they all made of dragonslaying power? Hal immediately summoned the magic gun to his right hand. Aiming at the old dragon skeleton, he fired.

One of the new discuses swiftly moved as a shield and deflected the magic gun's bullet of red light.

'Hohohoho... I was thinking it was about time for you to arrive, now that the winged lizards are all gone.' gone.' gone.'

Riding a discus, Exhos rotated his skull, pointing his empty eye sockets at the river bank. He was staring at Hal.

'Welcome, Lord Tyrannos of the Bow.' Bow.' Bow.'

"Sorry, I need the guy with the sword for something, so I've got nothing to say to you."

"W-What did you say...?"

Hearing Hal's declaration, Pavel Galad groaned.

The silver dragon was still kneeling on the ground, only turning his eyes to look at Hal. However, that already seemed to be taxing his limit. His gigantic body suddenly shrank.

Ten-odd seconds later, the silver-white dragon turned into a handsome human young man.

He was kneeling on the riverside lawn, a pained expression on his face while holding his hand against his heart.

"Hmph, to think you are weakened to the point of being unable to move a dragon's massive body. A body forcibly revived without using a secret ritual of resurrection will not heal so easily."

The magic gun whispered in mockery with Hinokagutsuchi's voice.

"Listen up, brat and priestesses. Hurry up and take care of this old geezer of a curtain raiser who has been a nuisance, making noise nonstop. It should take no more than a single arrow."

"Don't make it sound so easy just because you don't need to do the work yourself."

"And it feels a bit disrespectful to the elderly..."

Hal and Orihime bore serious expressions, joking only in speech only.

The enemy was an elite dragon and controlling emulated dragonslaying power to boot. Although his physical body was quite fragile, being bones only, he was probably the most experienced in magic out of all the enemies they had encountered so far. There were probably very few elites capable of controlling such a massive number of Raptors.

However, of Hal, Orihime and Asya, not one of them was afraid of Exhos.

They were vigilant, of course, but remained calm and composed. They knew that they had already obtained power surpassing the elite in front of them.

This was probably thanks to their mutual link to the Rune of the Bow through the bonds of their covenants.

"Putting questions of morality aside, Hinokagutsuchi's opinion definitely cannot be more right. Then let's eliminate him quickly. Use me—and Rushalka."

Asya delivered her words with stern dignity.

At merely the age of fifteen, she was already a seasoned veteran of a witch. Having suffered hardship countless times in the face of the elite dragons' overwhelming power, this girl had finally obtained the privilege to strike back.

This time, they were the ones in a position to trample the dragons—

However, Asya did not get carried away or lose herself to rapture. She simply maintained a warrior's calm and issued a declaration as though the enemy's defeat was set in stone.

This was Europe's former Shootdown Ace. Hal nodded greatly and shouted sonorously, "Then Asya, I entrust the queen's power to you!"

"Leave it to me. Rushalka!"

The instant they breathed in unison, a giant red body appeared in the air.

A translucent dragon king—The Crimson Queen. Thus, the queen merged with the blue wyvern in midair again.

Rushalka became equipped with chest armor and a pair of arms made of ruby material.

Speaking of which, this was the "Queen Form," right? Witnessing this sight, Pavel Galad's human appearance panicked noticeably.

"To think an imitation could... transform? What is that power—!?"

'Hmm, it seems that some bizarre little trick is being played.' played.

Skeptically, Exhos stared at the "serpent" in Queen Form.

However, he still continued to attack, probably driven by a dragon's nature. Of the eight discuses summoned by the old dragon, two flew towards Rushalka at super high speed.

However, this attack did not work. It was deflected with futility.

The blue wyvern's entire body was enveloped and protected by pearly radiance. Identical to what surrounded Hal and Princess Yukikaze, this was imperishable protection.

'Hmm—!? But that is the protection only dragon kings and usurpers can use!' use!' use!'

"Rushalka, high speed flight!"

At Asya's command, the wyvern in Queen Form instantly took flight.

Her target was above the scattered clouds in the night sky. With astounding acceleration, she reached sonic speed in merely a few short seconds.

Breaking past the cloud layer, she ascended rapidly with momentum to reach the heavens.

However, Exhos' eight discuses also sped up violently, rising rapidly to chase after Rushalka.

The discuses also showed amazing speed. Looking absolutely determined to catch the blue wyvern, they finally arrived right behind her.

However, Asya issued commands at this point.

"Accelerate further! Pull ahead, Rushalka!"

The wyvern in Queen Form responded to these commands in calm composure—Or rather.

She broke the sound barrier matter-of-factly, emitting sonic booms while she flew, easily shaking off the eight discuses' pursuit behind her.

After creating a certain level of distance, Rushalka turned around with a twist of her body and stared at the arriving discuses with calm eyes.

Her left arm of ruby was holding a crimson bow with a blue-white arrow of light in her right.

Soaring the sky with her back turned, she nocked the arrow to the bow at the same time.

"Freeze and Crack!"

The arrow released by the ruby arms immediately split into eight to intercept the approaching discuses.

The attacks met their marks completely. Struck by the arrows, the discuses were all frozen, then shattered like ice sculptures. They exploded.

This battle, taking place in the far end of the sky—Hal was cognizant of it as though it was happening right before his eyes.

This was thanks to his link to Rushalka through the vassal covenant.

'Tsk! A mere imitation!' tion!' tion!'

This time, Exhos attacked using the discus he was riding.

Instead of Rushalka, his target was Hal's group on the riverside.

Hal calmly deployed imperishable protection. The pearly light enveloped not only himself but also Orihime and Asya.

Colliding with this layer of protection, Exhos was sent flying together with his bronze discus.

Furthermore, Hal fired his magic gun thrice—in triple burst mode. Struck by the bullets, the skull of the old dragon Exhos shattered.

But the all-bones dragon remained impressive as ever. He was still capable of speaking from his rib cage.

'Curse you. Do not believe that this is over!' over!' over!'

"Akuro-Ou, finish him!"

Responding to Orihime's command, Akuro-Ou descended rapidly from her standby position in the air.

Then using this momentum, she pounced with reckless abandon, knocking the bronze discus away. Riding on it, Exhos—the skeleton specimen with the missing skull—was sent flying too.

Without a moment's pause, Akuro-Ou instantly lunged at the ancient specimen, thoroughly crushing the rib cage within her jaws.

In addition, Rushalka flew back with lightning speed—

And swung her right forelimb at Exhos' back, stabbing dragon claws of ruby into his spine.

'GAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!' '

Ra Exhos' bones screamed in a deathcry, crumbling and scattering.

One could say that an old dragon had finally met his nihilistic demise. This was the moment of complete victory for Hal and company.

Part 3

With the eccentric old dragon's demise, two inheritors of dragonslaying power were reunited.

At the shore of the Kyuedogawa, Hal and Pavel Galad were finally face to face. Two witches watched them from a slight distance away.

"Conferring the ancient sovereign's appearance upon imitations, thereby allowing temporary ascension to the throne—Truly a fearsome power. This ought to be named the secret ritual of imperial election..."

"Imperial election? Oh, you mean electing an emperor? Like what those prince-electors did."

Hal understood what Galad had implied.

Prince-electors. A name given to powerful princes of the Holy Roman Empire in medieval Europe who held the exclusive privilege of electing the "king." This authority was shared between high-ranking nobles and Catholic archbishops.

"I never expected such a massive gap to arise between us in such short time."

"Well, you were heavily injured, after all."

Galad muttered, unable to conceal his disappointment, hence Hal shrugged.

What was formerly such a powerful silver dragon was now kneeling on the ground in human form, because he did not even have the strength to stand up. The silver-haired and handsome young man looked extremely disheartened in demeanor.

However, Galad shook his head and refuted Hal's words in chagrin.

"That is not what I mean. The 'secret ritual of imperial election' you have acquired is but a mere step from reaching the lofty heights of the dragon

kings—That is how potent a power it is. You are now the Tyrannos closest to the throne."

"....."

That being said, Hal totally had no wish to increase his ranking on that front.

He sighed lightly and decided to change the subject. After all, there were more urgent matters to attend to.

"Let's put the long-winded discussion aside for now. Anyway, do you want to join forces with me?"

"What did you say?"

"It's fine if you want to stay in Tokyo for a brief while. We'll reach an agreement to coexist temporarily without letting the Japanese populace know. Compared to having Princess Yukikaze as a neighbor, we—no, I—would rather accept you."

"You wish... to join forces with me?"

Facing Galad's handsome but dumbfounded face, Hal nodded.

The dragon before him was an extremely dangerous monster, having killed many humans personally in the past. If one were to seek the entire nation's opinion through a referendum, opposition would most likely be overwhelming.

However, Hal currently wanted to secure "another faction" even if it meant going against public consensus.

"Please. As the saying goes, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, right? Besides, both of us are weak and powerless in the face of the dragon kings. Instead of killing ourselves through infighting, taking arms together is how we can come out in a win-win scenario."

"Do not be ridiculous. As a pure-blooded dragon, how could I possibly join forces with the likes of a human—"

"Oh my, what's wrong with doing it once in a while? Besides, you're currently in human form right now."

"....."

"Also, the reason why Exhos failed to find you for the past few days was thanks to hiding among humans. I heard it from the girls who were with you."

"Ugh..."

It looked like Hal had exposed what Galad hated to touch upon. His gaze turned dark and vicious.

However, it only lasted for an instant. The dragon warrior's handsome face, full of manliness, showed an impressed look as he narrowed his eyes slightly to stare at Hal.

"More than just the power of imperial selection huh...? You have changed greatly within short time."

"Too much happened, after all. If possible, I'd rather live ordinary days as an ordinary citizen."

Hal never expected he would be making private deals with a dragon like this one day—

Right now, Hal was in a situation he never would have imagined in the past. However, he wanted to avoid death and also hoped to retire at the age of forty to live the rest of his life in leisure. And in order to achieve this goal, the world needed to become more peaceful than its current state.

Both active and passive, that was the nature of Hal's motives.

"Bow user... I recall your name being Haruomi."

"Yeah. I'm honored you remember me."

"Fighting side by side... If that is the case, naturally, I must confront *that*."

Galad glanced at the Kyuedogawa river mouth—Tokyo Bay's starting point.

He must have noticed too. A new enemy was approaching. However, the dragon betrayed Hal's expectations despite the beginning collapse of his obstinacy, rooted in his hot-blooded character, in a mere instant.

"Nevertheless, it is impossible. I have exhausted my powers in the earlier battle. I do not have any remaining strength to fight alongside you."

"Sigh, I was guessing this might be the case."

Hal sighed again, having lost count how many times he had sighed today.

Concerned about this point, He had discussed with Luna Francois beforehand to see if they could locate Pavel Galad before the Yukikaze faction did. The result of this negotiation also turned out as expected.

"I might make the same request if an opportunity arises in the future. Lend me your aid when the time comes."

"...Are you not going to kill me? Haruomi."

"The enemy's enemy could turn into a friend. I won't kill you off pointlessly."

After saying this on purpose in a casual tone of voice, Hal returned to his companions.

Since Galad could not be used, he should be shot and killed on the spot to eliminate a future threat. Hal had deliberately pretended to have overlooked this option.

"No good, I guess? Looks like I'll have to call negotiations a wrap for today."

"No helping it. It's our turn next."

"—So last time's giant turtle really is the princess' servant!"

Asya nodded after listening to Hal's report. Looking through binoculars, Orihime cried out. The Japanese girl was currently looking in Tokyo Bay's direction at the river mouth.

A "black dot" could be seen on the horizon. It was gradually approaching.

Facing Hal who was nodding in response, Asya said, "While Haruomi and Galad were talking, Luna brought news. The remaining Raptors have been completely destroyed by her Glinda."

"As expected of the Shootdown Ace from America."

"However, It seems that the JMSDF has also issued a report."

After the complete annihilation of the Raptors at Minamikasai—

Having summoned Glinda back to Shin-Kiba, the American witch had received a report. The dragon king's minion that had appeared offshore of Haneda four days prior, Genbu-Ou—that giant turtle—had apparently floated up from the sea in Tokyo Bay and was heading towards the Kyuedogawa river mouth.

The star performer was finally arriving on stage. Asya immediately announced, "We'll first have Rushalka fight as much as possible. Once she reaches her limit, entrust the queen's power to Akuro-Ou—I'm counting on you, Orihime-san."

"Yes, leave it to me!"

What Pavel Galad called the "secret ritual of imperial election" was the trump card of Hal and the others.

It did not equate to unlimited power. Only one vassal could take on Queen Form, which was why they decided to have Rushalka, whose capabilities were top-notch, to transform into the queen while relegating Akuro-Ou to support.

As for Glinda and Minadzuki, who had received the Rune of the Bow, they were in the back on standby.

Hal's magic gun also had remaining ammunition. There was probably no other city in the world with an anti-dragon lineup comparable to this.

"Unfortunately, this still won't be enough, but all we can do is try."

"Yes. Times like these could be described as having 'nothing to lose in trying,' right?"

"Even Orihime-san has learned these magic words at last..."

The three of them chatted while jogging over to the bank near the river mouth.

Genbu-Ou, the gigantic minion almost a hundred meters in length, was gradually approaching from Tokyo Bay. Its supermassive body was charging over the sea, probably two or three kilometers from the river mouth.

"Should I have Rushalka snipe with the bow first...?"

Just as Asya was murmuring to herself...

'Fufufufu. The time for a rematch has arrived so soon, Haruomi!'

Adorable laughter resounded across the night sky. It was Princess Yukikaze's announcement. She was watching Hal from somewhere up high.

'That being said, my earlier injury has yet to heal... For the time being, my minion, Genbu-Ou, shall serve as your opponent. Please do not underestimate Genbu-Ou.'

Backing up the princess' casual voice, Genbu-Ou vocalized loudly while approaching on the sea.

GOAHAAAAAAAAAAAAATH!

'Just as you are able to entrust the dragonslaying bow to subordinates, I, Yukikaze, can also turn my servant into a dragonslaying arrow. Fufu, although nowhere as light and agile as I, Yukikaze, Genbu-Ou is still a force to be reckoned with once turned into an arrow. Let's fight fair and square, Haruomi!'

The challenge she issued was dignified as a king's yet playful and innocent like a child's.

Perhaps Princess Yukikaze was treating Hal as a "rare playmate." Even Hinokagutsuchi whispered from inside the magic gun, "Hmm. The little lady seems to like you very much."

"It really doesn't make me happy to be liked in this manner..."

The instant Hal muttered quietly, Genbu-Ou underwent a transformation over the sea.

The gigantic body, a hundred meters in length, began to emit golden light. This was the same phenomenon as witnessed offshore of Haneda previously. Genbu-Ou's glowing brawny body was closing in on the river mouth.

Several hundred meters away from landing. Asya instantly yelled, "Rushalka, equip the queen's bow! And use pseudo-divinity!"

"Akuro-Ou, you use fire magic too! And with the Rune of the Bow!"

Orihime commanded immediately as well.

Using pseudo-divinity and the Rune of the Bow simultaneously, the two girls intended to attack with a technique of assured annihilation.

However, it seemed like they were not using the "sun-shooting divine bow," right? Being their greatest trump card, but extremely costly in consumption, it was imperative to wait for the right moment before using it.

Tasked with their orders, the two "serpents" happened to be hovering overhead, biding their time to act.

Rushalka in Queen Form first summoned the crimson bow to her left hand.

Then her right hand conjured an ice arrow—from arrowhead to the fletchings, the arrow was sculpted from ice—then shot it swiftly. As soon as the arrow left the bow, almost a hundred identical ice arrows appeared behind the blue wyvern's back.

The scene of a large amount of arrows in the air was both magnificent and fearsome.

"Rushalka, Magic Missile!"

Responding to Asya's command, the remaining arrows all shot at Genbu-Ou simultaneously.

It was like heavy machine gunfire. Meanwhile, Orihime also took the opportunity to yell, "Now is the time, fire!"

Akuro-Ou summoned nine black arrowheads.

These arrowheads flew to a position above the approaching Genbu-Ou before releasing flames together. Nine beams of flame attempted to incinerate the gigantic turtle minion. At this moment, the ice arrows rained down like a sudden downpour. However, none of this worked.

Enveloped in golden light, Genbu-Ou's gigantic body remained completely unharmed.

"Last time it didn't work either when I shot my gun..."

"Well, that humongous mass itself seems to be the 'arrow'..."

Hinokagutsuchi's voice whispered privately to Hal after he gasped.

"In all likelihood, that thing should be sluggish in reaction with substantial limits on speed too. However, stopping its advance will be as much of a hassle as preventing Yukikaze from flying, brat!"

"That's why it's best not to have a frontal clash, right!?"

"Let's shift locations first! Orihime-san, counting on you!"

"Yes. Akuro-Ou, please!"

Shining with golden light, Genbu-Ou invaded the river mouth.

Genbu-Ou was only dozens of meters away from Hal's group. However, Akuro-Ou descended from the sky at this moment, then shrank her body upon landing, becoming roughly three meters long.

Orihime, Hal and Asya climbed onto the white fox-wolf's back desperately.

After all of them had mounted, Akuro-Ou immediately took a leap, using the momentum to start flying. Suddenly, Hal looked down at the ground in sudden realization.

Mutou-san and Funaki-san might still be inside the community center.

No signs of people could be seen in that area. The three minibuses parked at the bus terminus had disappeared, so presumably, they ought to have evacuated swiftly. After all, with giant monsters battling nearby, it would be only logical—

Just as Hal felt relieved, the enormous monster from the sea reached the river shore.

Instantly, the golden light surrounding Genbu-Ou's entire body exploded. It was like some kind of gigantic detonation. Asya immediately yelled, "Rushalka, deploy imperishable protection...!"

The blue wyvern flew next to Akuro-Ou and deployed a pearl-colored defensive field.

Hal also ordered the Rune of the Bow to guard himself and his companions using the same power of protection. Next, the golden light's explosion devoured the surroundings—

Two minutes later, the field of view, dyed golden by the explosion of light, gradually returned to clarity.

Looking down at the ground from Akuro-Ou's back in their aerial escape, Hal and the others could not help but fall speechless in surprise.

The whole vicinity had been cleared out to become a new stretch of empty land. The vast lawn on the riverside, roads, houses in Minamikasai, towns and neighborhoods—Everything had been swept away cleanly.

On closer examination, one could see a crater near the river mouth with a radius of two kilometers.

Furthermore, the area five or six kilometers surrounding the crater had been flattened by the light's explosion, completely destroying everything above ground.

Within this vast plain, the only moving living creature was the gigantic Genbu-Ou.

"Haruga-kun, look at that!"

Orihime pointed in the air from atop Akuro-Ou's back.

Flying there was a steel-colored Raptor. Held by its hind limb was a handsome young man, Pavel Galad in human form.

The Raptor released Galad after landing on the plain, then took flight again.

"By exhausting his last strength, he managed to summon one... Looks like that's what happened."

"But since the Raptor immediately left... I suppose Galad really doesn't have any remaining energy to sustain the summon."

Similarly, Asya and Hal nodded at each other on top of Akuro-Ou's back.

Incidentally, there was roughly a kilometer of distance between Genbu-Ou and Galad on the plain.

'Oh, what is this? Isn't it the silver dragon who had inherited the sword?'

Naturally, the voice echoing in the air was Princess Yukikaze's.

'Speaking of which, I received news that you were hiding in these lands. This is perfect. I shall take care of you while I am at it—Genbu-Ou, attack again. Do it more thoroughly this time.'

On the ground, Galad did not respond to the princess' voice.

Lying on the barren plain, he was squirming in pain. Literally as one might describe in an insult, he did not even have the strength to retort.

But judging from his personality, it was possible that his heart was shaking precisely due to the shame.

And having received the master's orders, Genbu-Ou—stood up, surprisingly. The gigantic turtle, a hundred meters long, had originally been crawling on all fours after landing.

But suddenly, Genbu-Ou stood upright on stubby hind legs.

Then glowing golden again, Genbu-Ou took flight, flying up in the sky like a rocket—towards the night sky where fleecy clouds were floating scattered. Hal gasped.

"Since that big thing is also a 'dragonslaying arrow'... Won't it take the same action as Princess Yukikaze last time?"

"—! You mean the finishing move of descending from a great height!"

Orihime had apparently pictured the same thing. Her expression was very stiff.

"If that thing crashes down, let alone a street... I fear the entire region will be wiped out, right?"

"That would be least of it. Although it's ultimately just an intuitive hunch of mine, had we failed to stop the princess' rapid descent, around 80% of New Town would've been pulverized."

Adding an even worse prediction to Hal's estimation, Asya said quietly, "In that case, we'll just have to stop it the same way."

"Asya-san will resist with a finishing move too, like earlier!" said Orihime. However, Hal's childhood friend murmured with a gloomy expression, "Frankly speaking... I'm not confident I can achieve the same outcome as last time. As Princess Yukikaze pointed out, it was probably because she had been careless. She can't possibly repeat the same mistake twice—But I'll try my best."

With a determined look, Asya said, "We are not fighting in solitude. Let's gamble on this fact."

The giant minion, Genbu-Ou, was rapidly descending from an extreme height estimated to be ten thousand meters.

Rushalka, Akuro-Ou and the three humans landed on the ground, preparing to intercept. Although Pavel Galad's human body was also quite nearby, they did not have the luxury to tend to him.

In Queen Form, Rushalka nocked an arrow of light on the crimson bow, aiming it at the sky.

Akuro-Ou returned to her normal size and waited on standby some distance away. After Hal and the witches exchanged nods with one another, Asya cried out fiercely, "Rushalka, Double Cast pseudo-divinity of the Moon! Receive the power of the moon!"

Leviathans were heaven-sent children of the moon and night.

In order to receive magical power from the brightly shining full moon in the sky, Asya commanded the invocation of divinity, thereby pouring the obtained power into the crimson bow. Then twenty-one runes of Ruruk Soun appeared behind Rushalka's back, signifying "I will fire the sun-shooting divine bow at the sky, to exterminate the sun."

Shining with golden light, Genbu-Ou was currently falling from the sky, belly exposed.

Like a meteor, hurtling straight at Hal's group from overhead!

"Now is the time—!"

At Asya's command, Rushalka drew the bow and shot.

The arrow of light released from the crimson bow flew in a straight line and was about to pierce Genbu-Ou's abdomen—However, the runes of Ruruk Soun for "shield" manifested at that moment to block the arrow of light!

Nevertheless, the sun-shooting divine bow lived up to its name as a technique of assured annihilation.

Blowing apart the fifteen-rune arrangement of "shield," it pierced Genbu-Ou magnificently.

However, this did not mean that things were over. Enveloped in blazing flame, the turtle's supermassive body began to burn intensely—

Neither exploding nor stopping, Genbu-Ou continued to fall while burning intensely.

The divine bow's firepower was not enough to destroy Genbu-Ou completely!

'I just experienced that move not too long ago! Don't think that the same attack will work twice on I, Yukikaze!'

"Well... Of course we thought of that already!"

Despite replying to the princess' echoing voice with stalwart dignity, Asya found her legs refusing to obey her.

The Double Cast for firing the sun-shooting divine bow had robbed her of stamina. However, a girl caught the exhausted senior witch in her arms. It was Orihime.

"Akuro-Ou, it's your turn next!"

The white fox-wolf answered the command with a howl.

Kuohhh!

In that instant, armor appeared to protect Akuro-Ou's back and flanks. Sparkling and magnificent as though made of ruby, it was a set of beautiful armor.

At the same time, Rushalka's chest armor and arms vanished as though it had been passed along—

"Use the queen's power to blow that big enemy away! We must succeed this time!"

A large-caliber cannon suddenly appeared on the armor protecting Akuro-Ou's back.

It was almost as though a tank's main cannon had been stolen and grafted onto her directly. However, the weapon was made of shining and lustrous gold. Indeed—

Orihime and Akuro-Ou had inherited the Queen Form from the heavily exhausted Asya.

Meanwhile, the gigantic Genbu-Ou continued to descend. It was now roughly a hundred meters from the ground.

Aiming at the target, Akuro-Ou fired the cannon of gold on her back.

A red flash of light exited the barrel and ascended the sky, piercing Genbu-Ou's massive abdomen.

In addition, a white beam came flying in from the northwest. On standby at Shin-Kiba, Minadzuki had fired the dragonslaying bow again. This attack utterly tore apart Genbu-Ou's shell.

Then unleashing the final blow was—

"Rushalka, Frost Breath!"

Asya, whom Orihime was supporting, and her partner.

The breath attack of ice shards and freezing air shot from the blue wyvern's mouth towards Genbu-Ou.

Although Double Casting had almost depleted her power fully, the reborn Rushalka still had enough remaining to launch one more invocation of pseudo-divinity.

Struck by a concentrated attack from three different leviathans—

The golden light surrounding Genbu-Ou finally vanished. The giant black turtle's massive body shifted slightly in its trajectory of descent, finally falling a hundred meters away from Hal's group instead of right on top of their heads.

CRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAASH!

The impact's heavy rumbling resounded in all directions.

However, there was no explosion of light. Hal and his team had successfully stopped the dragonslaying arrow.

Witnessing the sight while leaning on Orihime, the master-class witch said quietly, "Looks like we took out the enemy relatively painlessly..."

"Asya!" "Asya-san!?"

Hal's childhood friend closed her eyes, falling asleep directly in exhaustion. Forcing her weakened body to launch the deathblow after a Double Cast— She had presumably reached her limit.

Tonight, Rushalka had used pseudo-divinity five times.

As a Level 5 witch, Asya could order her "serpent" to invoke divinity five times.

In other words, she had fully exhausted her power. While feeling grateful to his childhood friend, Hal inquired of the magic gun in his right hand, i.e. Hinokagutsuchi.

"Is that big thing dead?"

After crashing to the ground, Genbu-Ou's massive body had not budged an inch.

Not only that, the pitch-black body was gradually turning gray. The discolored portions immediately began to weather away, crumbling in collapse.

"Yes. After all, it suffered such a harsh blow. Due to the excessive body size, it had no other method of fighting apart from charging using momentum."

"At that kind of size, simply charging is already enough to cause extraordinary devastation..."

Despite muttering that, Hal also felt relieved. At this moment, Hinokagutsuchi whispered "Hmm?"

After putting down the sleeping Asya on the ground, Orihime asked, "What is the matter, Kagutsuchi-san?"

"Well... I stand corrected. The little lady, Yukikaze, has made an interesting move."

The magic gun's guardian spoke ominous words.

The meaning of her words immediately came clear. Genbu-Ou's massive body kept weathering away before Hal's eyes, turning into dust. Finally losing all semblance of its original form, the body collapsed completely.

However, a large serpent was hiding within the debris.

It was twenty meters or so in body length with a black surface and even featured what seemed to be a pair of bat wings on its back. No limbs.

A black serpent with wings. Hal was doubting his eyes. Somehow, he found this monster's airs quite similar to one of his absent comrades, namely, the reborn Minadzuki.

"In other words, That Genbu-Ou, or whatever it was called, was being controlled from inside."

Hinokagutsuchi commented gravely.

Part 4

'Bravo, Haruomi! I am impressed that you were able to strip away Genbu-Ou's armor to pull out the Huashe's true appearance. Fufufu, I, Yukikaze, approve of your capability!'

"H-Huashe...?"

After listening absent-mindedly to Princess Yukikaze's praise coming from the sky, Hal searched his memories.

Huashe. This was the name of a monster featured in the ancient *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, an unusual Chinese text and illustrated bestiary of famous monsters. If memory served him correctly, it was a winged snake.

Hal examined the Genbu-Ou's contents again.

A winged serpent somewhat reminiscent of Shirasaka Hazumi's partner, Minadzuki. Hal figured out why. It was the lack of savage ferocity.

Whether leviathans or dragons, both were lifeforms whose purpose in life was to fight.

It was unknown whether this was the reason, but no matter which individual, they would exhibit savagery to various degrees within and without. In other words, one could call it a sense of wildness. However, the reborn Minadzuki did not produce this kind of impression.

Even in battle, she remained calm throughout, to the point that she was not equipped with an inborn weapon, i.e. a horn counterpart.

Hal thought it was due to influence from her partner with the gentle disposition, but...

'True Genbu-Ou, you were originally a merciful goddess. Although it pains me to issue such an order... Still, you must exterminate my enemy Haruomi and his followers.'

Meanwhile, Princess Yukikaze was announcing in what could even be called a gentle tone of voice.

'Choose your means as you wish. I shall entrust the arrow to you, so use it to your heart's content.'

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh—

True Genbu-Ou called out shrilly yet elegantly in response to the princess' command.

Then a magic symbol appeared behind True Genbu-Ou. The horizontal oval had an isosceles triangle inscribed within it—The Rune of the Arrow, almost reaching the size of the serpent's body.

"Hmph. Forcing an ancient goddess to don armor and enter the battlefield? Well, those beings are all gentle souls for the most part, after all..."

"K-Kagutsuchi-san, what do you mean by an ancient goddess!?"

The murmuring voice of the consultant in the magic gun made Orihime react.

"It's very reminiscent of Hazumi's Minadzuki to me. Is there some kind of relationship between them!?"

"Certainly. The *imitations* employed by you lot are made in reference to goddesses created by human hands during antiquity, are they not?"

Listening to Hinokagutsuchi, Hal jumped in surprise.

Ancient magi had created artificial lifeforms—imitations of dragons. The parent generation of Hal and the others had discovered the sample, Grandmother Immortal.

In other words, was the grandmother of the "serpents" the same kind of creature as True Genbu-Ou!?

"This is really bothering me, so you must tell me the details, but wait until later. Right now, that thing is our opponent!"

"I-I agree. Akuro-Ou, I am counting on you!"

After Hal extended his finger to point in the sky, Orihime nodded hastily.

True Genbu-Ou had spread her wings and flown into the sky. Then hovering motionlessly there, she gazed down upon Hal's group and Akuro-Ou with cold and stern eyes. She was practically like a cruel goddess.

Akuro-Ou fired her artillery against this solemn black serpent with wings. The golden cannon on her back, acquired through Queen Form, fired a red beam.

"Juujouji, be careful with the timing for using pseudo-divinity!"

"Good point. After all, it's my final shot!"

By pouring magical power using pseudo-divinity, the golden cannon would be able to fire a technique of assured annihilation.

However, Orihime was a Level 3 witch, meaning she could only order the use of divinity thrice a day. And tonight, she had already used it twice.

Hence, Akuro-Ou fired five blasts in succession, but without the use of assured annihilation.

Meanwhile, True Genbu-Ou was using the "shield" runes of Ruruk Soun. Fifteen magic symbols were arranged to protect the winged serpent, deflecting the cannon blasts.

However, Akuro-Ou in Queen Form did not stop. She fired another three shots consecutively

The "shield" protecting True Genbu-Ou began to blink, weakening progressively. Under the Queen Form's blessing, even the firepower of normal shots were raised dramatically without invoking assured annihilation.

"Continue with this and defeat her, Akuro-Ou!"

However, Hal suddenly reacted in alarm upon hearing his classmate.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh—

The divine beast cried out shrilly as before.

Immediately, the Rune of the Arrow behind True Genbu-Ou moved, arriving in front of its bearer who was gradually getting overwhelmed by Akuro-Ou. Then something unbelievable happened.

"Huh!?"

"What's wrong, Akuro-Ou?"

When the Rune of the Arrow moved in front of True Genbu-Ou, Akuro-Ou stopped firing at the same time.

The golden cannon, which had been firing nonstop, vanished suddenly. Taking its place, a symbol of a "tilted half-moon" appeared on the white fox-wolf's back—The Rune of the Bow.

Also, in True Genbu-Ou's surroundings, twenty runes of Ruruk Soun manifested.

It signified "ceasefire and quelled conflict." In other words, the lowering of arms and the cessation of hostilities. With the appearance of this arrangement, both runes, the Bow and the Arrow, disappeared at the same time.

"Th-The power of dragonbane was erased!?"

"Well, it should only be temporary..."

Just as Hal was taken aback in shock, Hinokagutsuchi sighed from within the magic gun.

"Although the enemy's power of dragonslaying is sealed, one's own power of dragonslaying must also be sealed away as well. As sons of conflict, dragons are incapable of accomplishing this. Only the race of goddesses with their gentle natures are able to perform such a miracle."

"Magic for preventing each other from using weapons huh..."

Orihime was quite stunned too, but she did not forget to instruct her partner.

"Akuro-Ou, the field is level for both sides, so don't lose. Even without the bow, you can punch and bite!"

Responding to Orihime's shout, the white nine-tailed fox-wolf howled sonorously.

Kuohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Despite losing the golden cannon, Akuro-Ou was still clad in the queen's armor. In this manner, she flew with agility and rushed at True Genbu-Ou head on. This was close quarters combat distance.

One of Akuro-Ou's nine tails extended like an elastic band, performing a pummeling strike akin to a right hook.

True Genbu-Ou deflected the attack by using a runic arrangement of the "shield" again. However, Akuro-Ou did not give up. The nine tails extended one after another, launching a flurry of strikes like fists.

A total of twenty attacks, it was like a raging wave.

Then finally, Akuro-Ou released a heat beam from her mouth as a finisher.

—However, none of it worked. Akuro-Ou's various attacks were all blocked by "shield" runes, unable to inflict any damage on True Genbu-Ou's body.

In addition, just as Akuro-Ou paused from exertion, the black serpent suddenly cried out shrilly.

Ahh—

"Akuro-Ou, hurry and defend!"

At Orihime's command, imperishable protection instantly enveloped the white fox-wolf.

Then seven runes of Ruruk Soun appeared over True Genbu-Ou's head. The meaning of that arrangement—Hal was rendered speechless. It was Magical Attraction.

Immediately, Akuro-Ou howled in surprise.

Kuohhh!?

The pearly radiance signifying imperishable protection—its particles of light—was gradually sucked into the runic arrangement of Magical Attraction, almost like how iron sand was attracted and would stick to a magnet.

The result was the gradual erasure of imperishable protection!

Confronted with this phenomenon, Hinokagutsuchi whispered inside the magic gun, "Imperishable protection is impenetrable... However, goddesses may choose to eliminate it in a circuitous manner instead of breaching it. This is magic usable only by their race."

"I-It's really a different lifeform from the dragons..."

Hal muttered and gulped.

All the theory accumulated over time was useless. This was truly a difficult predicament.

Meanwhile, Akuro-Ou attacked again. Extending her nine tails, she tried every way she could to pummel True Genbu-Ou. However, the "shield" still blocked everything.

Furthermore, True Genbu-Ou was biding her time to counterattack.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh—

With a cry from True Genbu-Ou, four gigantic runes of Ruruk Soun instantly appeared in the night sky.

They meant "divine punishment." This arrangement brought a gathering of dark clouds, blotting out the starry sky. Deep rumbling shook the heavens— And lightning descended.

"Akuro-Ou!"

Worried about her partner, Orihime cried out. Guarded by protection, the white fox-wolf remained unharmed.

However, the imperishable protection was gradually disappearing due to the absorption spell. Instead of dispersing, the dark clouds above kept aiming lightning to strike Akuro-Ou.

At this rate, defeat would be inevitable—Hal raised his magic gun.

He had remaining ammunition. There was no choice but for him to personally step into the forefront now.

However, True Genbu-Ou's sharp gaze glanced at Hal while at the same time, she used the "shield" to block Akuro-Ou's attacks as before.

She was clearly aware of whom to watch out for the most in this situation!

"What a difficult enemy..."

It would get blocked even if he used the magic gun to attack? Hal sighed.

He had to find a way. How could he ambush True Genbu-Ou in a surprise attack? Ambushing that monster that was unlike a monster, overwhelmingly sacred, calm and composed with powerful magic at her disposal—

If Princess Yukikaze were in this situation, she would probably rely on her own powerful strength to charge like an arrow.

Then she would probably defeat the enemy magnificently. How envious. As a powerless human, Haruga Haruomi would not be able to carry out such a tactic to fruition no matter how hard he tried...

At this moment, Hal made eye contact with a non-human existence. Speaking of which, that guy was nearby too.

"You mentioned joining forces earlier, didn't you—"

From that deep and dark voice, he could sense all sorts of emotions.

Humiliation, competitiveness, pride, anger, misgivings, defiance and loyalty. He was an overly rigid and hot-blooded man. The current situation was probably forcing his hand.

"O Tyrannos of imperial selection. Just as you can see, my blade is chipped and my sword is broken... Nevertheless, if I were to say there is still something I could do, what would you do?"

My enemy's enemy could become a friend—Hal recalled what he had said before.

In fact, Hal had contemplated this earlier. He should not falter just because the enemy had a human appearance. Mustering courage to shoot and kill him to prevent future threats would not be a bad choice. However, Hal did not choose to do so.

From a realist standpoint on the battlefield, this should have been a good choice.

However, Hal could not do it. No matter what, he could not do it.

Hence, he decided to take a gamble. That guy's presence might end up affecting the battle's final outcome after all. It would be nice to gamble on this possible future.

And now, that man was relying on his last strength to get up unsteadily and extend his right hand.

Hal nodded and approached him, extending the magic gun.

He—Pavel Galad's human body—reached out with his right hand to hold the handgun of steel and gold. Gnashing his teeth, he said, "I entrust the last of my remaining strength to you... You must defeat the queen's servant!"

Thus, Galad collapsed powerlessly and lost consciousness.

Then Hal sensed Hinokagutsuchi's consciousness in the magic gun fall into deep slumber. She had gone out of her way to seal away her own existence in order to allow the magic wand's magical power to be fully used on combat.

With that, all that remained was for him to do his best. Hal immediately yelled, "Do it, Juujouji! Now is the time to struggle desperately using this thing!"

"Leave it to me! Haruga-kun, we will defeat that snake together, whatever it takes!"

After Hal and Orihime exchanged nods, the two of them began to sprint.

Their destination was Akuro-Ou's side. Attacked by lightning descending from the sky nonstop, the white fox-wolf had been pressured to land on the ground. Standing firmly on four legs, she maintained a low stance with imperishable protection deployed, enduring the lightning of divine punishment in this manner.

The winged black serpent was gazing down at the one-sidedly enduring Akuro-Ou from the air with aloofness.

It was evidently an unfavorable situation, but Orihime clenched her right fist and presented the back of her hand to her partner. Manifesting there clearly was the Rune of the Sword.

The magic symbol formed from a series of three inequality signs of "<" — The same rune surfaced on Hal's right palm. Furthermore, the magic gun held in this hand also changed. A roughly fifteen-centimeter blade was fitted under the grip as a bayonet.

"Akuro-Ou! Here you go, use the dragonslaying sword too!"

A silver-white longsword was equipped onto Akuro-Ou's back.

An extra metallic arm of ruby from the back armor was holding this sword. Using a human arm as an analogy, it would be equivalent to everything below the elbow.

The entrusted trump card—the dragonslaying sword. The metallic arm was raising this sword horizontally.

At first glance, it seemed as though Akuro-Ou had sprouted a wing on her right side.

Kuohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Having obtained a new weapon, Akuro-Ou howled powerfully. Orihime immediately shouted, "Cut her down with the sword!"

The metallic arm on the fox-wolf's back moved, gripping the raised dragonslaying sword vertically.

In terms of kendo, it would be the upper-level stance. Immediately, lightning fell from the sky. However, the longsword on Akuro-Ou's back deflected it, thus dispelling the lightning of divine punishment.

This dragonslaying sword, exhibiting a remarkable feat immediately upon its introduction—

Its blade was almost as long as Akuro-Ou's body. The sword was also quite rugged and broad.

The white fox-wolf raised the steel sword again as though spreading a wing and jumped up high, flying towards True Genbu-Ou which was staring down at her from ten-odd meters in the air.

Then the moment she passed by her target, she attacked using the dragonslaying sword with a horizontal slash.

Naturally, the winged black serpent continued to defend using Ruruk Soun's "shield"—However, the dragonslaying sword sliced through True Genbu-Ou together with the fifteen runic symbols!

Ahh—!?

This was the first time for True Genbu-Ou to emit something like a scream.

The central part of the long and stout serpentine body was sliced open, spurting red blood.

"Success? Juujouji!?"

"No, not yet. Not enough damage!"

Although True Genbu-Ou was undoubtedly inflicted with a heavy injury, she was definitely still not neutralized.

This time, two "shields" formed from runes of Ruruk Soun appeared around the serpent, putting up a more sturdy defense.

Furthermore, seven new symbols manifested over the bleeding wound.

The meaning was "healing hand." Tragically sliced open by the dragonslaying sword, the wound stopped bleeding and slowly closed up... Hal groaned.



"She's like an RPG cleric. Now that's what I call a durable tank."

The majority of magic wielded by elite dragons were terrifying and offensive.

In contrast, this super lifeform, called a "goddess" by Princess Yukikaze and Hinokagutsuchi, was applying magical power towards defense. Moreover, she seemed even more skilled in this area than the elites.

"We need an even more powerful attack to overwhelm the enemy..."

By the time he knew it, Orihime was already leaning close against Hal.

She—Juujouji Orihime—would be akin to the joystick for controlling the vassal, Akuro-Ou, more effectively. Hal embraced his extremely attractive comrade.

"I'm counting on you, Juujouji!"

"Yes. Akuro-Ou, please!"

Orihime shouted out while entrusting herself to Haruga Haruomi.

Hal pulled her towards him and held her tightly in his arms. The sensation of her voluptuous bust was pressed against Hal. The potent magical power generated in Hal's heart was poured into Orihime's heart through intimate contact with her bosom and skin, finally flowing into Akuro-Ou's heartmetal—

Orihime had previously forbidden him from touching her in an obscene manner, so this result was the compromise.

However, this kind of tight hug was actually even more passionate than before. Furthermore, Hal also took this opportunity to use his left hand, which was not holding the magic gun, to squeeze her bottom hard.

Thanks to that, he was able to confirm that highly elastic feeling, accompanied by a sense of volume surpassing the bust.

"Mm... Mmmm. Th-This time, let us—do what we did last time!"

Despite squirming in discomfort from the scorching magical power flowing into her body, Orihime still gave instructions.

Her voice sounded more bittersweet than last time, causing Hal's spine to tremble in waves. He could not help but embrace Orihime even more tightly.

"J-Juujouji!"

"Haruga-kun!"

Locked in mutual embrace, the two of them witnessed the phenomenon. Nineteen runes of Ruruk Soun had appeared on the dragonslaying sword held in Akuro-Ou's arm.

It signified "I summon the thunder god's sword to unsheathe in haste—"

The technique of assured annihilation exhibited by Pavel Galad last time was being launched by Akuro-Ou this time.

The sky was filled with dark clouds. The white fox-wolf immediately summoned a rain of lightning to bathe herself, storing it as energy. Then howling, she flew.

Kuohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Her entire body enveloped in white lightning, Akuro-Ou pounced at True Genbu-Ou and stabbed the longsword on her back deeply into the black serpent's throat.

In addition, Hal raised the magic gun while hugging Orihime.

Naturally, the muzzle was aimed at True Genbu-Ou. Activating assured annihilation, the magic gun fired in full auto. All twenty-odd bullets remaining in Hal's magic gun flew at the winged black serpent in the form of red flashes of light, repeatedly chipping away at the long and stout serpentine body.

Then True Genbu-Ou's body exploded, releasing intense light—

Thus she met her glorious demise in battle.

However, the black winged serpent had been hovering in the air close by. Less than twenty meters away, it was an explosion at point blank range.

Hal hugged Orihime tightly and used himself together with imperishable protection to defend her.

Hence, Orihime hugged him tightly in return.

Maintaining this posture—that of mutual embrace—they waited for the explosion and shockwave to subside. All they could lean on during this time was each other's sensation, temperature and supple bodies.

Then the explosion and shockwave finally dissipated.

"W-We survived..."

"Not only that, I think we won..."

After saying that, the two of them released each other and smiled radiantly.

Then Orihime threw herself into Hal's arms again. Hal caught and her body strongly in return.

In the end, they were locked in a passionate embrace again.

"We succeeded, Haruga-kun!"

"It's all thanks to you, Juujouji!"

However, using "that method" to perform a technique of assured annihilation was severely draining, as one might expect.

Hal's legs suddenly stopped obeying him due to sudden fatigue. Since he was currently embracing Orihime, she hastily tried to catch and support him—but failed. Japan's former kendo champion girl did not even have the strength to do so.

As a result, Hal pushed Orihime down unintentionally, helplessly pinning all his weight on her.

"S-Sorry. If I don't hurry and move..."

"D-Don't worry. Haruga-kun, you don't have any strength either, do you?"

Hal apologized in embarrassment, so Orihime replied in a gentle tone of voice.

"I-It is the same for me... So how about we rest like this for a while, shall we?"

Despite being pinned to the ground, Orihime did not utter a single complaint. Instead, she hugged Hal while displaying a gentle gaze.

"I'm very grateful to hear that from you... But sure enough, this is still bad."

"Why?"

"Because it's you and we're pressed so tightly together, I'll definitely have dirty thoughts."

"Seriously... You're as lewd as always..."

Despite voicing her displeasure, Orihime continued to gaze at him gently. Wrapping her arms around Hal's back, she hugged tightly.

With Orihime under him, exhaling hot breath, Hal could feel a vivid sensation of her body.

Thanks to that, Hal finally experienced a real sense of "lucky survival" as a strong surge. He could not help but exhale deeply.

Epilogue

A few days had passed after the battle against the dragons occupying Tokyo New Town.

New Town was back to normal, in a way. After Exhos died, all affected New Town residents began to wake up naturally. The "freeze" magic had probably been sustained by the old dragon's magical power.

However, there were many problems.

Four days of frozen hibernation had caused temporary memory confusion and reduction in muscle strength—Rescued citizens were plagued by such symptoms to various extents in the immediate term.

That being said, it was quite fortunate that side effects only went as far as this.

"But the number of times for dragons to appear at New Town in the past few months... has been truly unusual. Even laymen can probably feel that something is amiss," said the shrugging Luna Francois, dressed in the Academy's uniform.

Classes had finally resumed at Kogetsu Academy today. After school, Hal's group was gathered at an open-air cafe's sidewalk seating. Hal, Orihime, Asya and Hazumi were all present.

"I heard that many people are taking this occupation incident as an opportunity to move out of New Town."

"I think almost ten people in our homeroom transferred schools too."

After listening to Luna's news, Hazumi concurred with a sad expression. Hearing that, Asya sighed.

"But even from the viewpoint of experts such as us, the current Tokyo is a dangerous land too."

"Bluntly stated, it's turned into an amphitheater where dragons gather to battle it out."

Hal looked in the southwest direction after whispering calmly.

From this off-campus outdoor seating, one could see the pure-black Monolith towering in the direction of what was formerly Ginza. As expected of a landmark a kilometer tall.

The Rune of the Sword in the air above the Monolith had vanished.

Hal recalled his conversation with Pavel Galad that had taken place after the battle.

Supporting each other, Hal and Orihime had returned to Galad's position.

Still in human form, sitting motionlessly on the ground, the silver dragon did not congratulate them on their victory. Not only that, but he also extended his hand with a bitter expression. As a result, the Rune of the Sword vanished from the center of Hal's palm.

In return, a longsword stained with fresh blood appeared in the dragon's right hand. Naturally, it was the dragonslaying sword.

Stabbing the sword into the ground, Galad ran his finger over the blade that had been dyed bright red from True Genbu-Ou's blood, then licked off the blood sticking to his fingertip.

Instantly, the extremely weakened Galad began to show vigor in his gaze. He suddenly stood up.

"Sure enough, a female serpent's blood is an elixir more potent than anything..."

"The dragon called Soth also did something similar. By the way, I never knew that dragonslaying runes could be lent out."

"However, it ultimately requires the owner's permission."

A dragon and a human. Two men of different races yet encountering similar situations.

Nevertheless, Galad turned his back to Hal and began to walk away, holding the dragonslaying sword in his hand.

"Where are you going?"

"I have no intention of telling you. However, We will probably meet again in the near future. As compatriots bearing the power of dragonbane, it is inevitable."

Without pausing in his steps or turning to face Hal, Galad said to him, "I shall say this in advance. When the time comes, I will not show mercy at all. The debt I owe to you—no, to you humans—has already been repaid by my lending out of the sword. That is how I think of it."

Parting words.

Only after Galad had disappeared from view did Hal finally notice. The Rune of the Sword had vanished from above the Monolith. The dragon warrior had abandoned the conquest of Tokyo for now.

Perhaps he had also given up on the Road to Kingship?

No. Hal rejected this line of speculation. Most likely, he would learn from this failure and focus on conquering the game in a different manner compared to before. That was a dragon's true nature.

"Is that Galad guy still in Tokyo?"

"It's not impossible, I guess. By the way, Haruomi and Orihime-san too..."

Amidst a peaceful atmosphere, Asya suddenly acted aggressively.

She was staring suspiciously straight at Hal and Orihime.

"Is something the matter, Asya-san? You are making a strange expression."

"There's something really bothering me. Listen carefully, Hazumi-san has been sticking to Haruomi for the past half a month. Like right now."

Round tables were used for the cafe's sidewalk seating. Hal's group was seated around the table.

Sitting on Hal's right was Hazumi. Suddenly confronted with Asya's intent stare, the girl, who was as benevolent as an angel, smiled tenderly.

"Now that you mention it, indeed, that has been the case. Yes. Just as you say, Asya-san, lately I've been sticking to Senpai almost the whole time."

"Th-That's exactly it. Seriously, Hazumi-san, I can't believe you're hanging around Haruomi as naturally as air!"

With shoulders shaking, Asya then looked at Orihime.

"And the new problem is that someone else has mastered the same special skill before I knew it. That's right, Orihime-san—You!"

"Uh, may I ask what do you mean by that?"

Asya pointed her name out as though she were a master detective solving a homicide case. Orihime was instantly stunned.

"Did I do anything unusual?"

"Yes! Why do you keep hanging around Haruomi for the past few days!?"

" "Huh?" "

Hal and Orihime, who was sitting on his left, exchanged looks.

Speaking of which, although Hal had been running all over the place to handle the aftermath, there were also many opportunities for him to be with Orihime. Since the two of them had been on the frontline to the very end in resolving the incident, it was less of a hassle to do it this way.

Furthermore, whenever they were together in the same space—

Hal would subconsciously move closer to Orihime.

Meanwhile, Orihime would immediately lean close whenever she saw Hal's face.

Ever since the two of them overcame the final trial, the instant when they had returned in triumph locked in mutual embrace, Hal and Orihime had been acting like this.

However, Hal could not explain why things developed this way.

"Well, think about it. Being together makes it more convenient to handle many things."

"I-Indeed. It's better with two people going to the same place together."

"And after launching the final blow, Juujouji was totally exhausted. I was worrying whether there might be aftereffects or the like."

"Haruga-kun, you've been very tired lately... I am worried about you too."

"No way. There's no need to worry about me. Despite how I may look, I'm actually quite tough."

"If anything, I am the one who is stronger than I look. Hence, Haruga-kun, you are still the more worrying case. Are you still sleeping insufficiently? Have you been eating properly?"

"Those areas are fine. Juujouji, you're really acting like a mother who loves to worry."

"H-Hold on, at least use 'older sister' instead!"

"Fufu. Asya-san is right. Lately, Nee-sama and Senpai have definitely gotten along much better. I'd really like to join in too."

Sometimes worrying about each other, sometimes joking with each other, sometimes caring deeply for each other.

Seeing Hal and her cousin so close, Hazumi seemed quite gratified.

Her smile conveyed pure joy celebrating the fact that two people close to her were getting along in harmony. Hazumi was definitely quite adorable in this regard.

Hal and Orihime smiled and looked at Hazumi in spontaneous simultaneity.

"Oh right. Since you need proper nutrition, Haruga-kun, why don't you come to my house for hotpot tonight? I'll call home to tell them to make preparations, so Hazumi, you can come along too."

"Really!? Fufu, I feel like it will be joyful meal, Senpai."

"But that grandfather of yours is also at the Juujouji house."

"Not like it matters. If it's you, Haruga-kun, even when confronted with my grandfather, you will still succeed in handling him tactfully, won't you? Oh, if you are free, Asya-san and Luna-san, please join us too."

"I-I don't really mind, but can we get a little bit back to the original topic...?" Asya replied in a trembling voice after accepting the joyful invitation stiffly.

With shoulders shaking, she was glaring angrily at Hal as though she were looking at a sex offender.

"Th-This is what I'm talking about! You're just Haruomi, what's with this playboy behavior!? I can't believe you're living the good life with a lady on each arm! G-G-G-Go back and reflect properly!"

"W-Who cares? It's way better than being on poor terms, right?"

"It's a matter of degree!"

"Fufufufu. It feels quite awesome and exciting to see Asya brandishing her fangs and claws like a wild beast. This sort of entertainment suits my tastes perfectly."

"You over there! Stop treating other people's stress as entertainment material!"

Despite Asya's forceful retort, Luna Francois ignored her with a completely nonchalant expression

Speaking of which—Hal looked at Luna's uniformed attire and asked, "By the way, Luna, why are you wearing a uniform again today?"

"So that I can frequent the school openly, right? I still have to complete transfer procedures."

"Transfer!?"

Not just Hal but all the others stared wide-eyed at the American witch.

"Didn't you say this earlier, Harry? Right now, Tokyo is the amphitheater where dragons gather. As the Trans-Pacific Shootdown Ace, after all, it goes without saying that I cannot sit back and do nothing."

"Well, you do have a point..."

"Besides, there is that other job, isn't there? Naturally, I have made all possible preparations to handle all personal requests in addition to this one. As Harry's representative," said Luna Francois with a wink.

Hearing her give an official answer to his request from several days earlier, Hal nodded gratefully.

"Then there's no time to lose. I'd like to find out how Pops got his hands on that weird rock."

"In that case, I shall first investigate the research materials your father left abroad."

"That'd be great. Also... After surviving the last incident, I've come to learn that it's not a bad idea to get my hands on another one. I hope you can help in searching for it."

"Searching for what?"

"Something that's the same as my bow and Galad's sword—namely, dragonslaying runes."

Just as everyone jumped in surprise by his statement, Hal's cellphone rang.

Hal looked at the screen to see that it was a call from Mutou-san, presumably to invite them to visit the UFO Research Club.

She and Funaki-san were quite anxious to hear Hal's group explain about "what happened last time." As expected, it looked like things were about to get very busy in the near term.

Hal sighed lightly and pressed the button on the screen to pick up the call.

Then night arrived.

After ending a rushed and eventful day, Hal came to the shore of the Sumida River. He had parted ways with the unexpected group of friends he had acquired since returning to Tokyo. Right now, he was alone.

Just by summoning with his voice, the gun-shaped magic wand and its guardian would appear.

However, there was nothing urgent requiring her presence. Hence, Hal strolled along the river embankment under the night sky, fully enjoying the relaxing solitude. However, once the situation settled a bit more, he still needed to find that former dragon king to hold a "strategy conference"—

"Still, assembling a team to go searching the world to gather items or find new weapons, etc... This is getting more and more like an RPG."

This type of poignant impression instantly surged in his heart as soon as he looked back at Haruga Haruomi's current state of affairs.

Hal extended his right hand towards the starry sky. This was the hand where the dragonslaying rune resided. Then he focused his consciousness—As a result, his right hand began to reflect sparkling starlight as though it were made of glass.

This transformation had started from his right wrist.

It was as though the surface was covered by a thin layer of glass.

However, all the joints in his fingers and wrist could still bend and move as he pleased. Hal had unintentionally discovered this change after his victory over Pavel Galad. At the time, it was only his fingertips, but now it had spread to his palm and the back of his hand.

"Sigh, my heart is no longer normal after all..."

Hal sighed and allowed his focused attention to scatter. The glow of his right hand disappeared as a result.

How long was the current situation going to persist for? No amount of contemplation would help the matter, hence Hal shrugged and stopped walking. Surely, a slightly weary expression must be showing on his face right now.

Hal shook his head and started walking again.

It was time to go home—Just as Hal spontaneously thought that...

On the Sumida River's embankment, it was possible to see the glowing emblem clearly above the Monolith in the Old Tokyo Concession. The design of a horizontal oval surrounding a narrow isosceles triangle... It was the Rune of the Arrow.

Princess Yukikaze had declared her occupation of Tokyo in Pavel Galad's stead!

Then Hal's right palm heated up. This feeling was—He immediately summoned the magic gun.

"Brat, she is coming."

The magic gun warned him discreetly in Hinokagutsuchi's voice.

Soon after, the girl in the white one-piece dress descended from the sky. In addition, she turned her body elegantly as though to deliver a spinning kick at Hal's face from midair—

Hal immediately deployed imperishable protection.

However, the snow fairy-like black-haired young beauty nonchalantly allowed her kick to connect. Although Hal was unharmed thanks to the protection, he was sent flying by the impact. Next, the girl landed on top of Hal.

Descending from the sky, the girl sat on Hal's waist, resulting in what was known as a "mounted position" in mixed martial arts.

"Fufufufu, I commend you for not being careless. I shall praise you, Haruomi."

Speaking from a higher position whether mentally or physically, this was Princess Yukikaze, of course.

Presumably, she was praising Hal for extending his right hand to point the magic gun at Princess Yukikaze's lovely visage despite being pinned down. Nevertheless, she also had her right hand position against Hal's throat in a karate chop stance. Both sides had drawn their weapons at each other.

"I'm truly embarrassed by your praise. But given this rare event of a girl falling from the sky, I'd rather wish for an unexpected romantic comedy to unfold instead..."

"What profound words, incomprehensible to me they may be."

"Yeah. I'm thinking every Japanese who loves rom-coms will agree with me."

Despite being straddled by a girl who had descended from the sky, Hal was having a friendly conversation with her.

Nevertheless, Hal kept the gun aimed at her whereas she was gazing down at Hal calmly. What an unbelievable situation.

After this posture persisted for a while, the princess suddenly laughed before standing up.

"Haruomi, do you know why I have come to find you tonight?"

"A declaration of war, I guess?"

"Not quite. It is to declare my victory, Yukikaze's."

Considering the literal words only, this was definitely quite an arrogant declaration of victory. However, it sounded unbelievably refreshing coming from Princess Yukikaze. Surely this must be the result of personal character.

A paragon of regal style, the beautiful maiden smiled cheerfully.

Hal sighed and stared at her while slowly standing up.

"Starting from this moment, this city and all of Japan belongs to me. Oh my, even though I don't intend to abuse the citizens, I, Yukikaze, am quite whimsical after all. When the time comes, I might be causing trouble for the populace. You, tell them to be accommodating."

"But I'm not your spokesperson, Your Highness."

"Fufu. That might not be such a bad idea. I, Yukikaze, like you very much. There is no man like you among the dragons."

"Of course. I'm a human, after all."

Hal did not insert the word "still" in his direct response. The princess smiled even more.

"Haruomi, ours is a relationship where a decisive duel between us is inevitable. If I defeat you and you're fortunate enough to survive, I, Yukikaze will offer you a chance."

"A chance?"

"Yes. You can become my minion."

After saying this fluently, the princess stared at Hal with a conceited and strict expression.

"If you turn out to be a warrior capable of surviving an encounter against me on the battlefield... A reward of this level would be richly deserved. Do your best, Haruomi!"

Certain death to those who fight her—The princess was subtly making such a declaration.

Parting with words very much in her style, Princess Yukikaze left Hal. Although she was walking with her unguarded back exposed to him, Hal had no intention of shooting her, of course. Because it could not possibly work.

Soon after, the magic surfboard flew over from somewhere.

Jumping vigorously onto the surfboard, Princess Yukikaze flew away lightly in the night sky.

Her destination was the Old Tokyo Concession—towards the bizarre presence of the pure-black triangular prism of a Monolith and the ostentatious Rune of the Arrow.

"In other words, the demon lord's castle has been built right next to our city? Described in RPG terms..."

Starting this night, the Old Tokyo wasteland had become territory under the beautiful dragon king.

Watching the princess flying away, Hal understood that a new adventure had already begun.



Afterword

Hello again, everyone. I am Takedzuki Jou.

Although it's been a number of years since I started writing novels for a living, I still haven't been able to fix my habit of playing while I work. Inevitably, I add fun elements and descriptions subconsciously everywhere in my works.

Of course, *Leviathan of the Covenant* is no exception in this regard. However, I don't know whether it's because some of my references are too obscure or not, it's quite common for no one to discover them (wry smile). It would be my honor if those who find them can smile knowingly to themselves, dear readers.

Thanks to your loving support, dear readers, this fun-filled series has passed the milestone of three volumes. For this, I express my deep gratitude.

Then there is everyone involved in editing, printing, sales and distribution, as well as Nimura-sama who is in charge of illustrations, and everyone at ALcot. Thank you for looking after me every time.

Next up...

Actually, this series is based on the concept where the main characters, with the protagonist first and foremost, are playing an RPG, thereby building the worldview and setting.

In this third volume, they finally enter the game's main route.

...To be honest, when someone asked me whether or not to end the series while it still had few volumes, I even thought up an "And our fight goes on!" kind of ending for the earlier content (wry smile).

Fortunately, the end is not here yet.

Starting next volume, expect various incidents such as searching for weapons, synthesizing items, learning incantations, exploring dungeons, wilderness adventures, numerous battles, various events, etc and new scenarios.

If the previous adventures was the basics arc, then what follows is the expert arc.

My sincere wish is for everyone to keep enjoying the story.

Furthermore, the manga adaptation drawn by Tachitsu Teto-san is also about to start serializing.

Tachitsu-san was able to draw the characters with abundant charm. As the original author, I find Hazumi particularly cute. Please support the manga version, everyone.

As for the rom-com side, main heroine Orihime-san has successfully taken the lead while the real heroine of Princess Yukikaze has entered the fray officially, while Hazumi-san is steadily catching up to the leading pack at her own pace.

If it pleases you, please pay attention to developments on this front—

"Wait a sec! What are you doing there, misdirecting the public!?"

Oh dear oh dear, isn't this Miss Main Heroine (tentative)?

I can't believe you ran out to this kind of place. How may I help you today?

"It's not like this is the kind of show where you randomly have a stopover, why are you going "oh dear oh dear"? Back in Volume 2, you clearly said you'll make me the main heroine, yet this time, I can't believe you nonchalantly pushed someone else instead!"

You've misunderstood, A●●a-san.

In the previous afterword, didn't I put in the word (tentative) for sure?

"Th-That's right, that (tentative) is totally problematic too!"

Hmm—So that's what you're asking about. This seems like it'll be a long story, but it's actually quite short. I heard that the author originally conceived of someone else as the main heroine...

"...W-What did you say?"

Nothing, what I mean is that the initial draft outline had a character similar to Orihime-san, but there was no character corresponding to you.

"Heeeee!?"

Next to come into existence was the princess in the dragon faction. Actually, she's the first character to crystallize among all the characters that have appeared. From the very start, I had already decided to make her the demon lord and rival.

"Jejeje!?"

Before writing the story, I had already thought in my heart that she was the heroine, or rather, the true heroine. And in fact, it is also gradually becoming the case.

"Th-Then what kind of concept brought about my existence?"

Uh—If memory serves me right, before I wrote Volume 1, you were designed to be the "beautiful maiden who is unapproachable and cool."

"Eh... (blush)? Although I don't like being flattered excessively, this can't be helped, I guess. Speaking of which, I definitely am a cool beauty, even more so, a beautiful maiden with an air of mystery..."

But when I actually wrote the story, it became this kind of character starting from the first page.

"Do you have anything to say about my personality (glare)?"

No, I really like the way you are?

It's just that inside the light novel industry where competition is so intense, is it really okay to be so low in feminine charm? Hence, in the process of writing the first volume, I tried a bit of magical remodeling.

"Magical remodeling?"

I modified your words and behavior so that readers would find you moe all at once.

However, when I continued to write further, your character somehow returned to its initial state by the time I noticed. Making the judgment call that remodeling was impossible, I decided to liberate your original self in the story, thus resulting in the current state of affairs.

"..E-Even the way I am now, I'm still a perfectly moe character full of moe elements, okay!?"

Credit in this area goes to the illustrator, Nimura-san, I guess.

In fact, after looking at Nimura-san's character designs, the editing side agreed to use you as Volume 1's cover. And I was struck by "Oh, so she could be regarded as a proper main," so naturally, it developed into the double heroine situation...

Anyway, since you're an irregular existence after all, I think the (tentative) still needs to be added.

"W-Wait a sec, editorial department people! Now isn't the time to be saying stuff like "what a shame for A●●a-san again this time"! Please demand that the author put more effort in promoting me. Also, Nimura-sensei, please give me more maidenly power—!"

Oops, someone's sudden intrusion totally derailed the topic.

I was just talking about rom-coms, right?

About she who is the main heroine (tentative), I'm hoping to treat this series as a kind of *Bildungsroman*, to observe her development and personality changes over the long term. However, it feels like a certain female character introduced in Volume 3 won't quietly wait for the day for her to leap to center stage...

So who among the heroines will be the main in the next volume? Is it time for the black ship from America to get serious? Or is the lineup of girls just for show? While pondering questions on this front, I'm making preparations for Volume 4.

Regardless, it would be my honor if all of you could continue to offer your support.

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